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A Conversation with Marilyn Strathern

Joanna Latimer (University of York) and Marilyn Strathern (University of Cambridge)

Marilyn Strathern is probably one of the most important thinkers alive today. Sometimes described as a classical anthropologist, there is actually very little that is traditional about what she does with thinking, concepts and anthropological knowledge. Her work critiques the conceptualizations, especially the material and social relations that body them forth, which produce the figure of the Euro-American individual. Through an engagement with some of the most profound political phenomena of contemporary life she critiques those phenomena and the ideas and relations they reproduce. Her extraordinary effect is to make us think the concepts and the phenomena, particularly Euro-American culture in the late 20th and the early 21st century, differently. She does this through how she rewrites the ideas that underpin them, often through the prism of Melanesian ideas.

My boldness in inviting her to have a conversation about intimacy for this volume comes from my own intimate entanglement with her work since first encountering her as a PhD student at Edinburgh (in around 1988) when I had the audacity to write to her and she had the grace to reply. Since then while I suspect that she is suspicious of me as both a sociologist and as a someone overly concerned with performance, she once told me on the publication of my essay on Frida Kahlo's self-portraits and 'dividual' being (Latimer 2008) that she knew there was an example of dividuality outside of Melanesia and that sometimes I do seem to understand what it is that she means. My love of her work and of her as an academic comes from her very real activism. She has dedicated much of her life to institutions and public bodies as well as worked tirelessly both for Anthropology, for women, and as a public intellectual. In the Academy she challenges at every turn the oppressive technologies and forces that emplace and situate creativity, thinking and knowledge-making practices; while in her writing she expresses something so incredibly hard to express – that despite the endless ways in which we are positioned as individuals our creation(s) is/are in fact the effect of relations and the parts of others that make us up, including the debt we owe for what forms us. And it is some of the intimacy of this vision that I hoped to capture in our conversation.

A potted history of Marilyn's extraordinary contribution and life's work so far can be found in many places (see for example Dilley https://www.standrews.ac.uk/600/events/celebration/graduation/strathern/). What I would like to add to all the gongs as she calls them, is that what I have experienced is indeed normal: people who have been through her department at Cambridge as students, as well as colleagues from all over the world, also speak of her as kind, generous and caring to them all.
JL

The Conversation
I'm sitting in Marilyn's house in Cambridge. She has given me lunch, and is going to go on with the interview even though she has a horrible cough and is clearly unwell. Marilyn has not had a schedule of questions ahead, but she knows a little about the Intimate Entanglements project and has already said she is not sure she has anything to contribute

to the notion of intimacy.

We have started talking about writing before I turn on the recorder. The interview to some extent performs intimate entanglement, at least mine with Marilyn's work, and hers with the things that have helped form her. But it also touches on how writing, researching, thinking and doing ethnography are practices which involve the making of intimate relations. I should add the conversation was full of laughter.

JL: OK, so say that to me again [what you said before I turned on the recorder]. That you write?

MS: I was just explaining, what I do is write, which when one appears before one's maker is not going to be very much for them to say, is it? I write! [Laughs].

JL: You're a writer, do you mean you're not a talker?

MS: But it's a very different genre from talking, and you can't translate from one to the other, because the act of writing and the composition and the echoes and what you build up in writing doesn't necessarily become - I'm sure some people can - but I can't translate it into a good narrative. So, maker or no maker, probably no maker, this [the interview] may not work.

JL: OK, point taken! [lots of laughter]. So I'm actually going to start with my writing question. So you told me once, a long time ago, that writing is the most important part of your work.

MS: I think it's the only!

JL: It's the only part? You said to me, it's when you feel most yourself. Or kind of at home.

MS: It's when I'm true to myself.

JL: And you also said that when you write you're having a conversation. That you write with someone or maybe more than one persons in mind. So I wanted you to tell me a bit more about that, and how that works for you.

MS: I think the fault of that of course is that it produces a style that people sometimes find impenetrable, in the sense that indeed there's a conversation going on they aren't necessarily party to. So essentially, I think people can perceive it as a problem. I don't write to, I don't deliberately, create problems. I think I'm explaining everything, you know, with complete transparency and clarity [Laughs] That's not how it's received. And it may be that this sense of always being in conversation contributes to that. There's an ethical side to it, and of course when I was doing my work on intellectual property I sort of touched on it, which is that, you know, nothing actually ever sprang from Zeus's head fully formed. I mean one is in debt, one is incredibly in debt, one is always

taking what other people have done, whether one knows it or not. It's not always that I have a particular person in mind, or I'm just thinking, writing for people who've provided me with the means to do so. Rather, you stand on, stand on the shoulders of giants and all the rest of it. I'm very conscious, that one is just simply turning the soil until the next person comes along. So there's that aspect. There's also the intellectual chase that one gets into, getting into somebody's argument. It does its work, it sparks you off, and you really want to pull it apart or you want to put it back together again or you want to take bits out. There are things that you think you could do otherwise. And so forth. And that's very often in relation to specific arguments. [Finally] I probably take too much for granted. That is, I assume. I assume other people know more than I do, and I assume other people are up to date, and I assume other people will of course get all the references I can never get! And I need to write to that kind of limit, always supposing that others know more than I do, and therefore I need to bring in all my resources that I've collected from, from all these other people, among other things.

JL: This is a long, long time ago, you will have no memory of this. I was once talking to you about writing and you told me to read Chapter Two of *The Gender of the Gift* – I told you this was going to be an intimate conversation! [Laughs] So when you're writing there, you say that we need to find a new way to write. I think you're actually writing back to the feminists, and their counter ways of writing, and that just inverting how argument is usually done is not enough. And I feel that when I read Marilyn Strathern, and I experienced this the first time I ever read anything by you, I become intimately entangled by you.

MS: Sorry!

JL: With you.

MS: Sorry! [Lots of laughter]

JL: No, it's a wonderful experience. It's exciting, but it is very intimate. There's something about the way you write. I once wrote that your parts become my own, and then I discover I can't think without your parts.

MS: This is disastrous!

JL: And then I probably turn them and make them into something you don't recognise. So, there's something about the way you write, and I have asked other people about this who love your writing, there's something about how you write that has this kind of extraordinary way of entering into one.

MS: Ah, that's rather nice. I think I shall wrap that [comment] up! Keep it at the bottom of my bed, and in the dark hours of the night, open it up! That's very sweet of you.

JL: That way of writing, no one can mimic it. What I wanted to hear you talk about I suppose, because remember I want this [our conversation] to go to those young ones that are also struggling with how to write. I've struggled with finding a voice in a world full of argument that positions one in particular ways. Do you have any memory of how you

developed your way of writing? You're bringing together these different things in such a special way, and you're thinking about them in the writing in such a special way?

MS: I think the message for young ones has to be that attention to how one writes should be the last thing that you do. Because you need to be attending to everything else, of which the writing is an outcome or an effect, and what you're describing is the effect that it has. Now I can't strive to produce that effect. In other words, I'm doing something else in relation to the arguments or whatever. I'm certainly not conscious of producing an effect like that. So it's not a performance in which the outcome is actually a specific effect, because that's what performances are. I put my nose into *Partial Connection*s yesterday evening, just to see what was in your head! And I realised as I was reading it, that I think what I'm doing all the time is holding everything up to question. It's not every word and phrase, because I do have a counter argument, which is that actually you need to just carry on with a lot of ordinary stuff in order to produce the occasional surprise or whatever. But that I am in fact somehow battling against what in my mind are conventional, taken for granted ways of doing things. Not because they don't have a place, they do indeed have a place, but they may or may not be adequate to what one wants to describe. So I'm struggling with the language in that sense, or rather more with the concepts than the language. And in that sense I am very conscious of what I'm writing, of the particular word and so forth. But if there's an effect it's the very, very general one of wanting to surprise the reader a bit, or turn things around a little bit. One needs to have the option of deciding why one is using particular terms and all the rest of it.

JL: Yes, and I think that the way that you do that, the way that you get your reader to go with you, is that you turn your reader over. You're turning them over so that one thinks differently. It's very difficult to recapture sometimes how you've done it! [Laughs] This is not something you can just package and pass on in an easy flippant way, as 'statements' or 'a theory' or whatever, where you can just find the right statement and on it goes. This is something completely different. So, it's exactly that experience, where you're turning something around, and it is affective for the reader. It's not just an intellectual thing, it's an affective moment when it happens.

MS: Yes, because I care. Definitely.

JL: That's what I would have thought. That everything is carefully done here.

MS: Not just carefully, but cared for. Then maybe it's myself that I'm writing for also. Yes, because I care. I'd never thought of it that way, but you've put the idea into my head, that if I'm having to lay things out for myself, then maybe that helps me bring the reader, bring the reader along.

JL: Yes, to use the Deleuzian concept, the experience for the reader is of having been unfolded. We've been folded up in something, and then there's this experience. And it's an affective experience.

MS: I can only, I can only thank you for being affected.

JL: So when I said one becomes intimately entangled, here are things that we're tangled up in. Maybe we don't see or feel things. We're feeling them in one way, and you come along and you unfold it and you turn it over and you get one to feel it, think it differently. So it's feeling/thinking, as intricately caught up with one another. Thinking for you isn't just something that goes on in your head.

MS: Oh no, no, no, no, it's as close to passion as I get! [Laughs]. Absolutely. No no. Intellectually, emotional or whatever, is absolutely where it's at. There's no question about that.

JL: Because it matters, how we think about things.

MS: Oh it matters incredibly. Because we then go and act on how we think. And maybe I'm not alone in this, maybe what drives me too is that there are recurrent habits of thought people just get into, time and again - 'nestle down, everything's fine'. And there's real anger, I mean I'm cross. Brexit completely sums it all up. Because the kind of closure to notions of interest and self-interest and what's good, nation states and all the rest of it, you know, it's as though there hadn't been 150 or 200, 300 years of argument and debate and dispute and alternative ways of thinking, so on and so forth. And we still produce the same problems for ourselves precisely by these habits of thinking. And that matters desperately.

JL: So your care is for that as well.

MS: It's critical care as well. That's what *After Nature* was all about. I was furious. I should write a Theresa May sequel to that! Perhaps I will!

JL: One of the things that's been absolutely at the heart of your work has been relations. You've got the idea in *Reproducing the Future* of products of conception, leading with thinking as a form of conception, and with sexual reproduction also as forms of conception. So you do this lovely doubling thing all the time, you keeping playing with that idea. I mean it's so deeply in your work, these two forms of conception, that we can play with them in these fabulous ways. So that seems to me - to go back to thinking and writing - as being a political act.

MS: Yes.

JL: I'm really intrigued as to how you got there. You know, it seems so obvious now, to those of us who've read your work, but how did you …?

MS: Well, you really need a bit of chronology. The first book was *Women in Between*. That was actually about gender before the term [existed in its feminist sense]. The term wasn't really in circulation until
after 1972, and that book was basically completed in 1970 or '71. And I had this epiphany in the field. I went out to - well I won't tell you what I went out to study, that was something different -- but I decided I was going to study divorce rates, because everybody seemed to be talking about divorce. Divorce rates in relation to the strength of clan groups and politics and so forth. And one of the things men did,

they were constantly hauling women before local courts that they themselves managed, thinking they were imitating the introduced courts of the Australian Administration. And in these courts women were invariably in the wrong. It was not just because men were in charge of the courts, but because actually if women were dissatisfied, that implied breakup of marriage, and that implied breakup of men's alliances. So women were situationally, as it were, to blame for marital disputes or to blame for the breakup of relationships between men. And I thought OK, this then feeds into a high divorce rate. And then I actually had the statistical tools to work out the relationship of divorced marriages to live marriages. (You *can* work out divorce rates.) And the divorce rate in Hagen was completely uninteresting, it was neither high nor low. The epiphany was, what had I been listening to? I'd been listening to [the enunciation of] a gender ideology. This wasn't a register of interest in divorce or high rates or low rates, this was a construction about the relationship between men and women in terms of who was liable and who was responsible.

Of course I didn't have that phrase 'gender ideology', I think I talked about sex roles or some bizarre vocabulary we had then. OK, so that was a little perception that I had in the field, but I came back and wrote a fairly regular monograph. And then in the decade that followed, which was of course the beginning of Women's Liberation and so forth, I actually wrote that book that you may have come across, *Before and After Gender*. Do you have a copy of it? I must give you a copy. It was written in Port Moresby, in Papua New Guinea, but it wasn't published at the time. And I became very interested in feminist and gender issues, and from that went very quickly into the whole natureculture thing that culminated with *Nature, Culture, Gender* at the end of the decade, 1982. So we'd moved from '72 to '82. And during that period all kinds of things came tumbling out. You know, if you query nature and culture, you query subject and object, you query individual and society. And in fact in that book, *Before and After Gender*, all that is prefigured, uncannily, although in relation to quite different materials. So by the end of the decade I was in a state of deconstruction. In other words I had caught the zeitgeist, you know, I was reacting to what was going on around me and I was performing exactly as you would expect somebody to at that particular period. And then of course it was in the early eighties that *The Gender of the Gift* was first conceived, and then it was published towards the end of the eighties. But it was that sense that suddenly everything comes tumbling, everything tumbles out simultaneously. And it's because of the simultaneity, that it's not just one concept, but there's a whole package of concepts that are obviously all part of an ideology, they're part of a set. And that's why in *The Gender of the Gift*, that first Part One, before you get to Part Two, I used the gift [i.e. gift relations, as opposed to commodity relations] as a metaphor, as a way in. But I was trying to demonstrate, look, all these ways of explaining, all hinge on this set of concepts that seem to me to need to be questioned. So that we're in the presence of an artefact. Language isn't an isolated thing. If I had read Deleuze at that point I would have had a vocabulary for describing the way it worms in and out of everything we do. ['Worms' is a reference to the burrowing of underground rhizomes, although the figure comes from Haraway's 'wormholes'.] So it was that decade.

JL: I'm really interested in something that you've touched on there. The way in which things that are happening in our lives, as writers, as academics, as people who are trying to think about things differently, and the things that are happening in the so-called not academic bits of our life feed into each other, and that we can't think one without the things happening in the other.

MS: Absolutely.

JL: And the way we're brought up is to guard against that as dangerous. You were saying the object/subject division, all the divides that we're thrown into as academics, are brought into the way in which habits get produced and reproduced over and over again. So that for me what you're describing there makes complete sense. It doesn't just have to be in your personal life, although these things are very important. Having children, and all the other complicated things that we do as women, or have done as women.

MS: Well my mother was very important here. She taught adult education classes, and in the fifties, Betty Freidan time, in the fifties she was doing classes on women in literature, women in art, women in this and women in that. And I grew up thinking that this was an ordinary thing to do. And then when it became politicised, as it were, I was simultaneously jolted out of that, because here are people making this a very unordinary thing to do, but at the same time I felt very much at home. So it seemed very obvious that I would be interested in all those gender issues. And of course they opened up anthropology: all one's fields of inquiry were suddenly doubled. It was incredible, the effect.

JL: Because you can put everything under question you mean? That everything that had been thought becomes…

MS: Everything, everything becomes… You suddenly have another perspective and more, different questions. Now, that was already happening with Marxism. There was that period of Marxist anthropology, that's now disappeared almost completely, but that was also doing a very similar thing, and suddenly everything was relations of production, this that and the other. So that was happening at the same time too. Yes, it had its exhilaration.

JL: I mean yesterday with these scientists that I've been working with, I was presenting some of the early thoughts about the little bits and pieces we've done so far. And the Director of the institute came, I didn't know he was going to be there, which was a bit of a shock! One of the things that I've been picking up and gathering was the way in which production, reproduction and creativity are running alongside each other, in this eye of the storm. This is biology at its most basic. And so I was trying to get that over, and showing them the way in which one can do some of the turning over through juxtaposing things which would never normally be put alongside each other. So we were showing them that the mice's environment is enriched, so they can become productive, and how the scientist's environment is enriched, to help them to nurture their productivity. But actually, they were mainly men. And I got the sense. I mean this is all from you, I couldn't have thought these things without you, Marilyn. But I did get a sense they knew what I was talking about.

MS: Yes, they knew what you were talking about.

JL: And they're interested.

MS: But they couldn't have expressed it.

JL: No. We were talking about the way they think about inside/outside environment, genome, epigenome, so on and so forth, and I was showing them the environment they are creating.

MS: You're brave.

JL: But it was interesting. So I was trying to play with what I think of as your incredibly clever trope, and start to open up. I don't know if it's more than a trope. Anyway, I thought you'd be interested by that. They want a bit more I think.

MS: Fascinating. They want more.

JL: We'll see! Anyway, so to go back to how you said it was like an epiphany, that way of thinking, that thing that you did is so at the heart of relations and how you think relations. And maybe that's what's in your writing, always this moving between the material, the concrete, well not concrete, but the lives, the richness of lives, and the way in which we can turn how we think through those and juxtaposing them in particular ways.

MS: Where that comes from, that I don't know. It may even have just come from, you know, my parents were always going to the dictionary to look up a word. Tracing the etymology. There's always something behind, appearances are never what you think they are, there's always something more. More to do.

JL: One of the things that interests me, in terms of your own, I don't know what we call it, I don't like the word methods, but how you …

MS: Whatever. As long as you don't say methodology .

JL: I'm not going to say methodology.

Ms: Good.

JL: I mean Donna Haraway would talk about becoming-with Melanesians, wouldn't she?

MS: Indeed.

JL: So I suppose one of the things I wanted to ask you about was how that happened, that becoming familiar. I'm going to use the term familiar, in all its broadest meanings, with the people in Hagen, with the people that you've spent a lot of your life thinking with and becoming with.

MS: I think that's a little bit about my earlier response that the effects of writing aren't a performance. I think the effects of being with, that is also an effect, it's an outcome. You might have in your mind, you've got to get on, you know you want to know these people well and get on with them, become fond of them and so forth. But having a kind of insight into the way they think or act, that then informs oneself, I think that's an an outcome and

an effect. And my enquiries, Joanna, they were completely ordinary: compiling genealogies, walking gardens to try and measure the amount of land people have,
weighing sweet potatoes in an evening to see how much people were eating, talking and doing all kinds of semi-practical bits and pieces, talking with people and having them tell stories. It just seemed all very ordinary. And I think maybe it was allowing oneself to feel it's ordinary, [which is] the fieldworker's trick in fact. Because, if you go back to these court cases for example, I knew the knowledge didn't necessarily come from a specific question or whatever, but I knew women were completely fed up with the way these courts were organised, but at the same time if they wanted to make trouble they'd got a very handy way of making trouble. And there was always this double-edged thing, [namely,] these men boss one around, but by the very same token that also shows that actually one matters, and one can very easily turn the tables on them and create a situation that they're going to have to sort out. So where that came from as knowledge, I couldn't track down to
anything specific. I needed to feel ordinary. Well it didn't take long. I mean one occasion, looking across and seeing – we had trunks in those days. Remember the days of trunks? Maybe you're too young.

JL: No, I do remember trunks!

MS: This trunk had, I don't know, MV, the name of ship, and London, its port of origin, [stencilled on it]. And I remember looking across, thinking 'From London. Golly, how far away and exotic.' And everything around, you know, the woven bamboo floors [for example], I mean that all just seemed completely as things were.

JL: Can you remember what it was like when you first went on a ship? Because you must have been quite young at the time.

MS: I was very newly married, 23. I got married young. And we left Southampton, my parents came down to Southampton to see us off. That was in December I think. We arrived in Sydney late January. It was a migrant vessel, it had come from Milan. I think it had something like 1100 migrants, taking migrants from Italy to Australia, you know, the "£10, come to Australia for £10". There were very few places to sit and read. In fact there were 12 actual places designated for sitting and reading on the ship. I'm not a good sailor, and the Italians used a form of disinfectant, that still, every time I think about it makes me feel queasy. I can still smell that smell. Coming back, we left the port in Papua New Guinea, [called] Madang, and went straight to Liverpool, on a cargo boat carrying copra. Copra is the inside of coconuts; it's used in margarine and detergents. (Copra has a very sweet sickly smell.). And [this time] we were the only passengers, so I was the only woman on the ship. We slept in the [ship's] hospital.

JL: So if you think about academic life now, all the kind of constraints and the ethics forms, and the and protecting the young researcher and making sure they're safe!

MS: And protecting their informants.

JL: And protecting their informants. And this experience.

MS: Of course we were green. We landed in Sydney. and spent, I don't know, a week in Sydney, and then flew up to Port Moresby, and were looked after by an academic couple who were attached to what was an ANU [Australian National University] research outpost. And the wife took me aside on the second day and said, "Marilyn, you know, in the tropics you don't need to wear nylons!" [Laughs] We were green. I don't think today's people, I mean you can't pass 12 and you know the world in a way we didn't know it at 22, 23 years.

JL: One of the things that really intrigues me in the work of yours I have read, which is by no means everything, you tend to avoid using the word identity. And you tend, I think, to prefer the word person. Or persons. Have I got that right?

MS: That's absolutely correct.

JL: Why don't you use the term identity? Because I think it's very interesting in this day and age of the politics of identity.

MS: Identity was a term … Talking about affect, it's as much a gut reaction as anything. It was a term that very early on I decided I didn't like, and that, I mean I can't now reconstruct my objection, except it seemed to me a lazy term.

JL: Lazy?

MS: I'm probably going to be making things up now. I'm not sure I really can reconstruct it. But it was at the time when it was on everyone's lips. you might think it's around a lot now, but I can assure you it was around a whole lot more, 25, 30 years ago. And the idea [was] that this was a goal or an aim that people were seeking, or [that] as an analyst you could solve everything by talking in terms of identity in a sort of unexamined way. For some reason, for some reason it seemed to me one of those incredibly loaded Euro-American concepts that made its use for analytical purposes really suspect. Person is a term that I get from orthodox classical British social anthropology. A person is a social configuration. It's always a relational construct. It doesn't have the [vernacular] implications of individuality that identity has. I think that's where the preference is.

JL: I was thinking of how Tony Cohen, when he talks about committing categories on persons, you know, and that idea that identity is a kind of category. I suppose that Euro Americans feel - you were talking earlier about performance - that they're kind of performing too.

MS: That's right, that is very Euro-American. And if one were only writing in that context, you might want to pick it up as an indigenous term that could be useful analytically. Because that's what people do.

JL: It's in the everyday, it's in their world.

MS: Very definitely.

JL: Yes, so the notion of persons, I mean I suppose it's getting back to something we were

talking about before about Melanesia and becoming familiar in Melanesia, this idea of juxtaposition, one of the ways in which what's so astonishing about what you accomplish is that you're laying alongside each other something that you've become familiar with, or you're describing, which is Melanesian. And then you kind of work that into things which are Euro-American, to open up things that are Euro-American, to do a cultural critique I suppose would be, would be the term. And is that in part where, when you're almost deconstructing what person is, even in a Euro-American context, to show that the way in which it's produced, performed, the dominant ways in which we think about what persons are, in itself, problematic? I wanted you to, to talk a little bit about that, about how you're opening up the very notion of what being a person is about, being a self. There's something you're always kind of working at here.

MS: You phrased that quite helpfully, because you enable me to turn it around. It's not that there is this category person and it needs to be addressed, or there's this category identity that needs to be addressed, but given what I want to say, in relation to whatever material it is that I wish to say it, is person appropriate or is identity appropriate? In other words the conceptualisation comes --- well, it doesn't come either before or after particular material one's dealing with, because it comes along at the same time, so the chronology would be false. But because person is slightly unusual in English, after all we do use it, everyone knows what we mean, and there are contexts where we use it on an everyday basis – like 'a person in their own right' – but actually we don't use it as much as we would use the word individual for example, or human being, or whatever. Slightly unusual. And it tends to be in legal language, doesn't it? Person of no fixed abode. Whereas we'd [ordinarily] say man or woman, or whatever.

JL: People.

MS: People. We say people regularly enough.

JL: Or you'd identify women as opposed to men.

MS: Exactly.

JL: So we go back to the category idea.

MS: If you talk of persons, it then enables you to use individual as a descriptive. An 'individual person',;you would have non-individual persons [too]. So it creates a space in that sense.

JL: The other thing you tend not to use, I don't think, is the notion of subjectivity which became again very, very current towards the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. So I wondered if there's a connection here for you.

MS: Definitely. I think if I were dealing with strictly Euro-American contexts, I would definitely need to reintroduce subjectivity as a concept. But it's subject to reams and reams of theoretical work done on the subject, and I'm just not interested. Just don't find it interesting.

JL: So the notion of subjectivity doesn't interest you?

MS: I could operationalise it as a verb; there are conditions under which people
objectify certain circumstances, or they draw it into themselves and make it part of
their subjective understanding of things. I could see it [as subjectification] as applying to an active
way in which people relate to one another, or relate to the world.

JL: I wondered if it was partly because it travels. I've got in mind another one of your thematics – parts of wholes – and whether there was something about the notion of identity, the notion of subjectivity, the subject, if it's taking us back to this kind of much more discrete sense of persons. Is that, is that where the problem lies?

MS: Yes, I mean I would much rather talk about agency. What activates people. And it's not just something that lies inside them either.

JL: So again it's that thing of not allowing it all to sit inside this kind of Euro-American imaginary.

MS: That's right. Of course the critique of that imaginary comes from its hegemonic status. If this was something I was unearthing from somewhere else I'd be completely fascinated. the ideas in themselves are quite as exotic and interesting as any other set of ideas. But the problem is they do all this other work, they do this political and ideological work which makes them very hard to get out from under. Whereas if I discovered them, and if I was battling with another kind of discourse and came across these views of maybe say the medieval world, yes? When we're all up to our necks in kinship and patronage. I mean in that context I could suddenly be extremely excited by these notions of the subject and all the rest of it. So it's the hegemony and the other work that these concepts do. It's not the concepts themselves.

JL: Yes. It's how they're used to hold things in place.

MS: It's how they're used, exactly.

JL: I think this is a really interesting issue about what we allow to enter in and what we try and keep out. I remember when I was writing my PhD, working in that nursing and medical world, everything was organised around needs. And I felt that "needs" were constructing the subject in a particular way. The subject being the dominant kind of figure.
And so I refused to use the word.

MS: That's exactly what I'm talking about.

JL: I mean the work was about older people. It's not that people didn't talk about "I need this" or "I need that". It was where the word 'needs' had become this shorthand for a whole. It's what you were saying earlier, a cascade of concepts that it was holding up. It's

just the tip of the iceberg. It's the metonymic effect. And underneath, the two thirds of the iceberg, is all this other stuff.

MS: That's right, absolutely. I mean it makes it sound childish, doesn't it.

JL: [Laughs] 'I'm not going to play your game, with your ball.'

MS: Exactly. But that is the point of criticism, and you can't criticise without language, and you can't criticise without taking into account the status quo, because that's what you're criticising, so you find these other ways to be drawing attention to it. It doesn't mean that in some ulterior sense I can't operate these other categories, in fact I live my life by them, I have a great sense of my subjective self, I have no problems with it. But it's like anything: [the problem is] when it becomes dominant.

JL: So your writing shifts things in the ways we were talking about earlier. I'm going to get back to intimacy. Because I think there's something here that we can't know about if we're going to use the word identity or the word 'needs' or whatever it happens to be. People usually think about intimacy as about the personal, and I suppose what I'm interested in is when intimacy becomes dangerous. You know, the idea of becoming, where things become a part of you so that you can feel them, so that the affect is the important thing. It's the moving, it's the being moved. We can do that in other ways, of course. We can move, and we can move with arguments and so on and so forth, but there's something about the process of researching and writing and thinking, whatever we want to frame that as, unless you have that kind of intimate experience with ideas or positionings then we don't really get what's at stake, if you like. That there's something at stake here when it enters in that way, in that affective way. It's not that you can plan it. I'm not suggesting that. Does that make any sense?

MS: Yes, there is something at stake. Well, in the case of an English speaker criticising speaking concepts, these are things that one lives one's life by, and therefore they are very close to one. And then you have to occupy a double position, living by them and seeing yourself living by them, which again is a very routine enlightenment perspective to take. the observer who observes him or herself observing, -- that's what they were doing with all those optical things in the 17th and 18th centuries.

JL: Does that capture it though do you think? I mean that's going back almost to a notion of reflexivity.

MS: No, no, the duality I'm talking about isn't just that of observation. What I said about observation is just one way in which it's been talked about. I think it's more to do with what one values or doesn't value. In fact one of the things I tried at one point in *Gender of the Gift* to talk about is some of the problems that [Melanesian] people's perception of relations gets them into. They aren't our problems, but they do have problems. And that means nothing's problem free. And the one thing isn't a solution to the other.

JL: Well the whole idea of a solution kind of takes us back into something. Like the idea of a decision. We perform it as if that's how things have happened, but is it how things

happen? So I suppose what I'm thinking there, I mean the whole project of intimate entanglement was the idea that to kind of understand a world-making or whatever we want to call it from the inside, you have to allow yourself to become intimately entangled in what the persons and things and all the other complex nonhuman, human relations. There's something about [how] we have to allow ourselves to become entangled. You can never be in somebody else's shoes. I'm not talking about perspective, any of those kinds of things, I'm actually thinking about when you were becoming familiar with Melanesian life, or world-making, and weighing the sweet potatoes and marking out the gardens, there were other things going on that were drawing you into their tangles there. And that this is a form of intimacy, even if it's something never admitted between you. You know, even if I went out there and said "tell me about Marilyn Strathern", you know. But you feel a tremendous sense of them. I know that because you've told me about going back. Year on year, and you went back not long ago.

MS: That's right.

JL: I remember you telling me about giving [some Hagen people] dinner, and you suddenly realised
they were probably thinking why didn't she just give us…

MS: They told me, they told me.

JL: Give us the money.

MS: Yes, yes, why waste money on a hotel.

JL: So why that story is interesting, because it sort of intimates that they didn't kind of get inside your world-making. So giving a gift of meal didn't mean anything to them.

MS: No, they couldn't see that. They wouldn't have the resources to see that.

JL: So how did that make you feel?

MS: I just thought it was a hoot, because I could have worked that out for myself. I had the resources to work that out and to realise that that's the way things were done. And in fact I was operating on the very mistaken Euro-American premise that their hospitality needed some kind of return of equal kind. That's totally wrong. They wanted something different from my hospitality. I remember once, from an exchange of gifts elsewhere, somebody gave a leg of pig, and that's a very important item to receive. And some time later another leg of pig came my way, so I returned it [to the first donor]. [But] that wasn't the point of giving me a leg of pig, it wasn't to get a leg of pig back, although it would have been among themselves, but I wasn't "themselves". They wanted something else, a shirt or pair of trousers, an outfit or a radio. They wanted something that I valued, something that was of value to me. They
[could even] imagine that I wouldn't regard the leg of pig as of any value.

JL: In the way they would regard it as valuable, because it didn't have the same meaning

for you.

MS: So they were calling me out. I mean they were right. The same with returning hospitality, it was a dumb thing to do.

JL: But you still did it, even after all those years.

MS: One doesn't learn. Goes on making the same mistakes.

JL: Yes, it's really interesting.

MS: One's own predispositions are so strong, that one translates all kinds of things, like sympathy and sense of obligation, being in debt. You go on translating these along the lines that satisfy you.

JL: Yes. I mean I'm thinking about the end of my meeting yesterday with the scientists, you know, because they want to know what I'm offering! [Laughs] And I want to know what they're going to offer. I was trying to tell them what I'm really offering. Which of course is probably a fatal mistake. Which is a different way of thinking about things. And that isn't what they want.

MS: What do you think they want?

JL: I think they want a simple way of being able to get on with their work, and want people to see it as of value. That's what they want, that's what they 'need'! [Laughs] To use that term. That's what they say they need. So what they want, what's the implicit going on here, I'm not sure. I think there's something they want, that isn't just that. I hope so, otherwise what's the point. I don't want to just show the same old stories about science and reductionism. I said that to them yesterday, I said "I know, you know, there's lots of stories about reductionism and how dreadful it is inside the laboratory, but when I get inside your laboratory you take me into a different universe. So some things are reduced and others are not. They're massively expanded, and that's the interesting thing." And I meant that, you know, I wasn't just trying to persuade them! It's another one of those funny sort of sociological things that have sat there for years and years and years and never been properly moved out of the way or opened up, that notion of reduction, when actually there's masses of magnification. You know, so the anthropological idea of if you're thinking reduction then you also have to look for what gets magnified, you can't just sit on one side, you've got to open up both things that are going on, processes. Because you can't have reduction without magnification. Anyway, so I don't know, Marilyn, I really don't know. But I think that story, giving them a meal, I think it's so profoundly interesting, in terms of you say it's a mistake, but I wonder if it's also, you know, an offering in a different sense. It was part of you and yourself, you were saying goodbye, weren't you.

MS: Yes.

JL: Which was important.

MS: Mmm-hmm.

JL: I was talking to a young academic the other day who does a lot of fieldwork, lot of ethnographic fieldwork with older people in nursing homes, with architects, with nurses, with the people that do the laundry, you know. And she loves it, it's her metier, doing that. And I've asked her to write about that. I said you need to be writing. She always writes with other people, so I said look, you need to start getting your own voice. "Oh, but these are all joint projects." I said I know they are, but you need your own experience. And she started to talk about that, about saying goodbye, what do you do, how do you extract yourself from the field and the familiarity. You're so deeply in there and then you have to extract yourself. I'm sure anthropologists have written about this for years. But it is the intimacy of the thing, that's when it's at its most vivid, that you have become intimate, not in the usual ways we think about intimacy, but in this other way, which I think is so important to how we work, whether it's reading somebody's work. I don't become intimate with a lot of the people I read that way! There's only some. The worms.

MS: The worms, indeed.

JL: So it's when we can see it. That story you told me is for me something about that they're always going to be with you. They're part of your parts.

MS: Of course.

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