

**“What is the difference between your objection to Marilyn Strathern on feminist anthropology and Kamala Visweswaran’s objection?”**

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*Abstract.* I respond to the charge that one of my objections to Marilyn Strathern’s rejection of feminist anthropology is the same as an objection made by Kamala Visweswaran. They may seem very similar to begin with, but I interpret them as different.

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In 2012, I published a paper entitled “Feminist Research and Paradigm Shift in Anthropology,” and in 2020 I put a revised version on *PhilPapers*. In both versions, I identify three arguments made by Marilyn Strathern in a 1987 paper against the assumption that feminist research can bring about a paradigm shift in social or cultural anthropology. I also object to these arguments. But my paper does not refer to earlier objections to Strathern, which is not ideal practice; and there is a question of whether one of my objections is the same as one advanced by Kamala Visweswaran (1988; 1994). Below I wish to address this matter.

One of the problems that Strathern presents begins with these propositions:

- (a) The anthropological fieldworker’s job is to describe the culture or society and to do that they need to interact with men in that society.
- (b) The feminist commitment of a feminist fieldworker tells them not to interact with men in that society.

These propositions raise the question of how there can even be a feminist anthropologist fieldworker. Must not either her feminism or her anthropology be sacrificed? What I proposed is a replacement for (b):

(b\*) The feminist commitment of a feminist fieldworker tells them not to interact with men in that society if it is a disadvantage to the project of reducing the oppression of women, all things considered.

I blandly proposed that whether this condition is met is to be judged on a case by case basis. There is no reason to think interaction with men is always a disadvantage. To now draw from the secondary literature, there can be “strange political bedfellows” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 787) and there is a need for “situational pragmatism” (Wallis 2003: 187).

This is what Visweswaran says:

Insisting on the opposition between a unified female self and a male other removes the power categories that exist between all anthropologists and their subjects: the ways in which women anthropologists may pass as honorary males in some societies... (1988: 20)

Here is a way of understanding Visweswaran. She thinks of (b) as based on these commitments about the (female) feminist fieldworker:

- (i) if you are a woman, you should not interact with men – the oppressive other;
- (ii) if you are biologically female, you are a woman – more fully, if and only if;
- (iii) you are biologically female.

A specific kind of feminism is committed to these, but another kind, which Visweswaran favours, would say, “Whether you are a woman or not depends on how you are treated in the society you are in and you can be biologically female but a man in some societies.” (See also

Boddy 1991) It holds onto (i) and (iii) but rejects (ii) and consequently (b) – without the combination above, there are just no grounds for that commitment.<sup>1</sup>

That's how I understand Visweswaran. The solution I had in mind in contrast is intended, to now be more specific, against (i). Whether you (female feminist fieldworker) should interact with men or not depends on contextual factors, circumstances, features of the situation. In some situations, interaction with men is a not a hindrance, all things considered, to the pursuit of feminist projects. Or at least there is no good argument, to my knowledge, for universal hindrance.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion between Strathern and Visweswaran is framed in terms of selves, with the latter suggesting that in some fieldwork contexts the feminist Self just is not there, so the instruction “Feminist Self, don’t interact with men,” does not succeed in referring to the fieldworker. It should not be assumed to simply be there once formed, contrary to an earlier feminism (1988: 29).

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