

The newly established Anthropology and Sociology Department at the Graduate Institute organized a workshop with Elizabeth Povinelli, Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University on December 7th, 2011. Students explored with her some of her ideas in her latest book, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011). Following the discussion Professor Povinelli met with Zina Sawaf and Ekaterina Nikolova, two doctoral students at the Department, for an interview in which Professor Povinelli reflected on her own intellectual and personal journey into becoming an anthropologist and talked about how it has shaped, and continues to shape, her practice of anthropology. The following emerges out of this initial conversation with Prof. Povinelli.

Elizabeth Povinelli currently chairs the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. Among her most influential works are *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities* (2002) and *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality* (2006).

*Professor Povinelli, what brought you to Australia first and what made you stay? As aspiring anthropologists, some of whom have been to the field, and others who are working on their projects and preparing for fieldwork, hearing about your journey to and into what became your “field” is especially interesting to us.*

It's a good question because it reminds us of the multiple ways that persons become anthropologists, and in doing so reminds us of the multiple potential anthropologies lying scattered within each one of us. So what I am going to say should be treated as an example rather than a blueprint.

How did I end up in Australia and why have I kept going back? How I answer depends on the genres at hand for giving an account of one self, right? There is the *Bildungroman* that begins with the subject and her divided desires and then there are other genres that begin with the world and its determination of these desires. The goal, however, would be to demonstrate the co-constitution of subject and world within the material

conditions of a given space and time; or, what my co-author Dilip Gaonkar and I call the habituated environments of being.<sup>1</sup>

The coming of age narrative would go something like this: I was born in the northern state of New York, but grew up in Louisiana in the deep US south of the late 60s and 1970s when racial integration was still being fought. I thought of myself as “dropping out” when in 1980 I decided to get my BA from St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. St John’s is a “Great Books” program that foregrounds the inter-relatedness of the disciplines and has a unified, all-required curriculum and no departments or majors. Four years later, realizing that no jobs existed for a “philosopher,” I “dropped out” again, applying to the Thomas J. Watson Foundation for a fellowship to study how Indigenous women’s changing economic practices were altering their political relations in their community. I went to Australia for the first time in 1984, and have gone back two or three times a year ever since, except 1986, working with the same extended Indigenous family.

Of course, all of this is a wild distortion. In what universe could going to college constitute dropping out? I only dropped out relative to another future people connected to a bundle of traits they thought they saw in me—smart, comfortable speaking in front of people, fairly articulate, white, middle class, female—and aligned to the world as it was then organized—so I should be a lawyer or a politician. So I dropped out relative to that articulation of self and world.

In any case, St John’s is very small place, and the entire College reads the same original texts. As a result it produces a thick self-reflexive discursive community, which is great. But it’s very limited in terms of what is read—“the Great Books Program” is not “a great books program.” It starts with the Greeks and ends with Hegel. The students are taught that these are the foundational grounds of Western Civilization and that Western Civilization expresses the highest order of human development. If you can get a critical perspective on this fraught ideology then I think the College is terrific—you get a really good sense of the self-accounting that the West gives of itself; you see the beginnings of certain disciplinary divides; and you see how certain conversations accumulate and become dominant; and dominating.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. Technologies of Public Form: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition, *Technologies of Public Persuasion*, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, eds. *Public Culture*, 15.3: 385-397.

*Was there the “other” at all in the texts you read?*

Not at all! Not really. Sappho was in there. Jane Austin, I think. And Martin Buber. But these were vague gestures at a world that, when push comes to shove, didn't count. There was no “otherwise to the other.”

So, honestly, I am not sure what prompted me to write the Watson proposal. I know I was watching Australian films that were coming out in the 1970s and being shown in the art house cinema in Santa Fe. I know one of my brothers was also in college studying to be a primatologist, which in the US is often taught in anthropology departments. So I must have known what anthropology was, but, honestly, I was fairly estranged from my natal family. In the process of the Watson interviews and receiving the fellowship someone said that my project was anthropological and I might want to get in touch with some Australian anthropologists. I looked up and found an anthropologist in Australia and wrote to her. Why her, I have no idea. She wrote me a scathing letter, saying that I was totally ignorant of the field and shouldn't even consider doing the project. And she was right. I really had no idea what this thing “anthropology” was and had no interest in finding out. I was a pretty confident, one could say arrogant—or maybe stubborn is a nicer word—young thing. So I just threw her letter away and went to Australia. I arrived in Darwin in 1984, looked on a map and found the Belyuen Community on the Cox Peninsula across the Darwin Harbour.

But to say, “I went to” or “I arrived in” Australia is to forget that the world is structured by specific circulatory paths that apprehend different kinds of people in different ways. Because I was apprehended as a kind of thing I was constantly projected into particular kinds of futures and into specific forms of circulation. And as I moved I was continually shaped—or sculpted—into these futures and circulatory spaces. All of us are, of course. Not just me. All of us are constantly being solicited to occupy the social spaces already existing for us. So if I say I wound up in North Australia with no real plan, I didn't wind up there—social space had its own plans.

But because we are all at least slightly aberrant to these plans, the ways we bend these plans matter. When I reached Darwin I bought a little motorcycle, because I had long had nightmares about crashing on a motorcycle and I thought, well, if I drive one at least then I will not have *that* nightmare anymore. I went to the Cox Peninsula, slept in a little

tent on a little beach because I had spent a lot of my childhood camping out with my family. I traded some maid services at a run down tourist hotel for a camping spot. After a while word got around about a slightly nutty young American woman riding a motor bike and camping on the beach, some people from the Belyuen Community came and asked, "Who are you? Why are you here?" I responded. "So you know how to write grants?" they asked. And I said, "Oh, yeah!" "You know about early childhood education?" "Oh, yeah!" I lied. "If you come and help us set up a crèche program, you can live in the community." "Do you mind working for an Aboriginal woman?" No. No... What could this "no" have meant before I knew what the referential and performative logics of the question entailed.

At the end of the year, in 1985, some of the older women and men in the community said, "You know, we are having this big land rights claim going on, and by law we need an anthropologist and a lawyer. You seem smart for a white person and you are solid (meaning you are strong), why don't you become our lawyer?" And I said, "No, I spent my entire life not being a lawyer. I am not going to be a lawyer." "What about anthropologist?" they asked. I still had no real idea what an anthropologist was but said I'd give it a go. So I went to graduate school to become an anthropologist.

*So it was almost their initiative for you to become an anthropologist?*

Well, neither they nor I cared so much about the discipline, but both of us kept confronting it, though again from different structural locations—they had to be the object of anthropological analysis; I had to be the subject. As I said, all of us are constantly being solicited to occupy the spaces already existing for us. How social space solicited each of us was, of course, extraordinarily different. My "dropping out" had one set of consequences. The structural drop had others. But when I did finally enter the discipline as a graduate student, it was 1986. And what's happening in anthropology in '86?

*Well... During the 1980s, anthropology as a discipline came under criticism for largely entailing the study of the non-Western "other" by the Western "self". Anthropologists became weary of the concept of culture as a tool for "othering".*

Right?! One of the responses to the critique of anthropology's enmeshment in the colonial project was more or less explicit auto-ethnography—basing the object of research on the identity of the researcher. So, for instance, why wasn't I studying white gay people? And I was thinking – while this might be the public nature of my sexuality its not my most compelling personal or intellectual drama. For whatever reason I don't think it provokes the most interesting thought out of me. It's not a threshold for me. I am not saying it isn't an intellectual threshold to other people – obviously it is. But as a friend of mine once humorously put it, my threshold seems to be marginal people in the woods. Nevertheless, the period saw an enormous amount of pressure...

*How did you address this pressure?*

I began thinking about the social and political conditions of identity and identification. Why, while foregrounding the vastly different social identities and identifications, and the starkly different social and material consequences of these identities and identifications, did I, do I, feel a home-ness with my friends in Australia, more so, perhaps, than anywhere else. What is it to be home in difference; what was the particular at-home in difference I experience there? From one perspective, the answer wasn't that complicated.

When I showed up in Australia I met a group of people who were not from a nation, but from a place associated with specific families that became part of a nation after foreigners came, massacred, and displaced their families. My paternal grandparents came from a village, Carisolo (Karezol) in what is now the Italian Alps. We were raised to believe we were one of just a few families who came from this village, and that many members of these families had been killed and displaced during the First World War. If we asked in what country was this place (Carisolo) located, we were told the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Well, it was the 1970s, I was living in Louisiana, and I didn't see the Austro-Hungarian Empire on any map. So it was a place without any placement. And these conversations were occurring in the context of violent racial integration in the American south.

So I felt a deep affinity with people kind of fairly immediately, maybe what Edward Said called "affiliation"—the non-biological forms of familial relationship. Our identities didn't collapse. Nor did they or I want them to. The difference between us has always

been as analytically productive for all of us as what we share. But there was a deep affinity that has led to the complications and hard work of affiliation.

But, I also think there is always something in excess of these personal and structural narratives of “why?” “Why do I keep going back?” No matter how many answers I heap onto this question, I won’t answer it. I think the real answer is much simpler even as it is less satisfying: I seem unable *not* to continue to go back yet. We laugh among ourselves about this, especially these days as my friends who were 8 to 10 when I first went to Belyuen are now their late 30s and 40s. Like most ongoing relationship, we piss each other off sometimes. At one point, one of my sisters was really angry with some of the family and said she was going to go away to another part of the family and never come back. “Me too,” I said. “Yeah, right,” she replied; “If you could you would have a long time ago.” “You too,” I said. We both cracked up laughing. We say to each other, “You’re stuck.” [*laughs*] But being stuck is not a bad thing. It means you have been claimed by something simultaneously internal and external to yourself. It is a way of not being in control of yourself, of being inside and outside of yourself, as a critical path to knowing your conditions more clearly.

*How did you address the 80s critique of culture? How did you address the fact that you were this white person among indigenous people as opposed to a gay person studying gay communities? How did you address the fact that you were studying the “other”?*

How did I address this? Well, as I said, I tried to think about what seemed insufficient about some of the responses for me—studying up; study the Self—again, for me, not for everyone. Maybe this has something to do with me never having committed to the discipline as such; or that my commitment came after my initial commitment to the people I knew. In any case, I never really saw myself as studying the Other and its Culture. I thought of myself as studying power, specifically the liberal governance of difference and the ways it decapitates the otherwise. So I thought I was joining with them to analyze the form that this power takes in their lives, namely, the politics of cultural recognition—what was called in Australia at the time “self-determination” which has always seems to me a truly ironic expression. And, although the subtitle of my very first book is “The Power, History, and Culture of Aboriginal Action” I wasn’t studying “culture” so much as immanent forms of belonging—*hereness* as a form of world-building.

In any case I think the cultural opposition of the Self and Other has given way to the problems of politics and affiliation. And when we move from Self/Other to the politics of affiliation, I think we can begin to understand why people are smarter and dumber about various forms of power and *herenesses* and *thesenesses* for reasons that might not be apparent at the surface of their social identity.

Not that the discussion of Self and Other was unproductive, even if it was at times a bit reactive. After all, before we are, we find ourselves within a set of identities and those identities do work whether we want them to or not. That's what I was trying to get at just a minute ago and that is what *The Empire of Love* is about: how identities shape and ramify in worlds of social affiliation and care no matter the intentions of persons—their and my racial and national identities, our sexual identities. On the one hand, whether I want to or not, I am apprehended and moved in ways that often benefit me and not people to whom I am very close. There is no way I can just say I'm going to will myself out of this skin.

This said, if we situate our discipline in the politics of affiliation (some are using the term “friendship” here), then its classic method—anthropology as a *dwelling science*, a method of knowing dependent on a phenomenological transformation—can be put to remarkable work. The ends of anthropology as a dwelling science would be to change the conditions of negative differential enfleshment. I don't want to get rid of the enormous proliferation of flesh. But, and here is what I have been thinking about lately, if I extinguish what enfleshes some because it is the condition of another's defleshment, then I will extinguish a lot of other things in the process, including myself. If you change the conditions that skin you, you will be un-skinned. Of course, this is harder than it sounds in part because the formal/figurative demands placed on things as the condition of their circulation in and across social space are the habitats and habitus of subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> We can't just choose change. We need to exercise change. In a little chapbook, the French philosopher, Michel Serres, beautifully reflected on the rigorous training of athletes and the ascesis of the social body, which gets to this point.<sup>3</sup> Neither the world nor I am rigid or flexible, stiff or plastic. I change the world through tedious, repetitive work. Ditto me. And if we succeed in changing the world or ourselves we

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli. After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise. *E-flux journal* #35. issues/35-may-2012.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Serres. *Variations on the Body*. Translated by Randolph Burks. Univocal: Minneapolis, 1999.

often find it or ourselves as out of sync with each other. We have made ourselves obsolete and yet we are still there. What I am talking about is very clear in the generational politics of resentment: “Those young people don’t understand what we went through.” And they don’t because the previous political struggle was effective and thus made the people who waged the struggle obsolete and somewhat opaque. We have to have peace with that. We think we change the world and then people just still see us in our goodness. No, we change the world and people think, “What the heck are you? You’re old-fashioned; or you’re x, y or z.” And then you get mad at them for seeing you like this. But then you have to tell yourself, “No, I wanted to change the world. That means I have to be willing to become an artifact”.

Maybe I am rambling a bit. Or all this sounds really weird and Buddhist—or Foucauldian. But I guess this is how I think through hard decisions about the politics of identity, identification, and affiliation. The “dwelling science” should be in part about field-formation and in part about self-deformation. As anthropologists, we have to develop a capacity to endure that. I think everybody, but I think especially us... [laughs]

*The people you’ve worked with over all these years have become like your family, right? Your metaphorical family?*

Well, they are my family. There’s no metaphor there. This doesn’t mean we are the same. There are some stark differences. Again, *The Empire of Love* probes this problem; as does *Economies of Abandonment*. And there are demands we place on each other that cramp our self-expression beyond which what many of my family and friends in the US would consider politically proper, but I consider this part of the immanent obligation we have to each other. So there are many kinds of conversations we have that would never become part of the public record for a variety of reasons, but are conversations about who we are, what we think, what each of us thinks should change about how we are in the world. But because I realize that many readers might find the word “family” unsettling, I alternate between friends and family. Though then I sound like a telephone commercial in the US that offers to charge less for “friends and family.”

*So you talked about them as your family and friends, but they also are and have been your “informants”, subjects of study, for lack of a better word. How do you negotiate between the two?*



I don't use the term informant. And not because I think it's a "bad" word. For some people "informant" is probably the correct word. But I think it would be a lie in my case, a way of denying how fundamentally my life has been shaped and altered by my friends and family in Australia. How I think. Why I think. What I think. They hardly determine me fully, any more than I they. There are tons of spaces in which I am involved and they aren't and tons of spaces in which they are involved and I am not. But I don't have specific preset scholarly projects that I apply to them. Whatever is happening to them seeds a significant part of my scholarly, political, and ethical thought. Maybe this is why I never know how to answer the question, "What's your project these days?" I start rambling on about what is happening—or what we are doing—*now*. How can I understand the governance of difference vis-à-vis its expression *here*? What can *we here do* in order to counter or make use of this form of governance?

Of course, my family friends in Australia ask me what I teach and lecture about. Do I teach others about them? My response is that I try to think about the account that the "government" gives of itself, that white people give of themselves, give about what they are doing and how what they are doing is good for others; and how this account makes no sense if you are standing where we—my friends and I—are standing. If they were standing here and understood what was going on, how would they have to change the story they tell about themselves. And that's, in a way, my method: dwelling in as a method of knowing the formation of the governance of difference.

*In the preface to "Economies of Abandonment", you quote Audra Simpson who writes about "austere ethnography" but then you say you prefer to call your work "sociography". Could you, please, explain your position? Linking this to our department, which is interdisciplinary - anthropology and sociology – should we be striving towards "sociography"?*

Both of these terms are stolen, one from Audra, and one from James Clifford if I remember correctly. The one thing I can absolutely tell you with confidence is that you should always take things and just make them your own. Don't worry about stealing. Steal; acknowledge whom you're stealing from, but steal, reform, deform, as long as it's interesting. If you use concept a blatantly wrong way, that's one thing. But if you deform it in an interesting way, that's called *thought*. So hopefully they both believe a thought has emerged from their words.

Audra Simpson is a colleague of mine in the Columbia Department of Anthropology, a Mohawk, and a terrific theorist of settler colonialism. She used the phrase “austere ethnography” to describe the experience of reading some of the preliminary chapters of *Economies of Abandonment*. She said it was a complement! She was trying to think about how one conveyed another social space/spacing and its figurative force so that the reader confronts their relationship to the figurating force of power rather than simply consuming others and their difference. I found that very interesting, and Audra was being very nice and saying, “That’s what your work does.” And I thought, “Well, that’s generous. I wish it did. Not sure I achieved this. Maybe, maybe not...”

Then when Clifford and I were in a dissertation hearing —I think this is right—I heard him use the term “sociography” and I thought it got at what Audra was thinking. If we are interested in the spacings of the otherwise<sup>4</sup>—rather than the space of the other—then we have to figure out how to write in such a way that you give enough of a world for readers to see the shape and effects of power... the intersections where there are dense threshold phenomena, you’re getting a feeling of a *field* of force...but not so much that you trigger the colonial fantasy of capturing *it*, describing *it*, being able to hold *it* like a little gem in all its little differences—a bauble you can put on your dining room table.

Of course, the problem with the terms sociography and ethnography is that both presuppose we are talking about humans. If we talk about an “assemblage,” it’s not just humans, it’s me and the pen and the medicine I’m able to take, and depending on where we are, we have antibiotic soap, and etc.

*From your work in Cunning of Recognition until now, has there been a shift in the way you write and the way you are doing anthropology? [Cunning of Recognition is Povinelli’s first book in a series that contributes to the development of a critical theory of late liberalism, looking specifically at Australian liberal practice and multiculturalism.]*

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<sup>4</sup> [According to Professor Povinelli threshold phenomena are inarticulate and destabilizing forms of potentiality that emerge in being and becoming “otherwise”.]

Well, I always say that I have one thought and I just keep rewriting it from different perspectives and angles. If you start with the first book, *Labor's Lot*, it might appear that I moved from the more particular to more general—it might seem like I am now speaking to more general conditions of power. But I think they are the same book. I want to understand the conditions of what I now call late liberalism. I really see each book as another chapter in this project. Or maybe it is like building. Each book is building from the unfinished wall of the last book and since I think most of my thought consists of unfinished walls...I also think we should be patient with ourselves and each other. But hopefully there's some accumulation.

*What comes after Economies of Abandonment?*

I am working on a book called *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. It returns to my very first book in order to think about a contemporary transmedia project that my friends and I are working on. There is also a little theoretical book that takes the questions of will, threshold, endurance and extinguishment that *Economies of Abandonment* put on the table.

*To conclude this enlightening conversation with you, we would like to refer back to Ursula LeGuin's story, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, which is very present in your last book, interwoven in it and contextualizing the narrative. In the story, we have this perfect utopia town, Omelas, but the perfect happiness of its inhabitants hinges on the constant suffering of a hidden and neglected child. Most accept the situation, but some cannot and they leave. Could you tell us, where are you walking to when you're leaving Omelas?*

Well, we don't know, that's the whole point.