



Shapes of Freedom. An Interview with Elizabeth A. Povinelli

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To negotiate in theoretical terms the social world's unequal distribution of freedoms with the thick, dense and intense reality of people's lives, framed by gendered, racializing, and classist constraints, and to further trace how this uneven distribution of freedoms is perpetually rearranged by historical forms of power that shape ever-changing conditions of humanness, is perhaps the deepest and most audacious project to which anthropology can dedicate itself.

It is indeed these projects that anthropologist Elizabeth A. Povinelli has undertaken in her thorough and refined examination of the modes of governance of contemporary worlds. Notably, through her critical study of the logics of Australian multiculturalism, its roles and effects on indigenous spaces, and with her recent analysis of the making and circulation of values about intimacy in liberal settler colonies, Povinelli has developed a critical theory of late liberalism that simultaneously takes head on the impasses of liberal forms of power and their intricate workings at the deepest levels of our (transforming) selves and lives.

In this interview, Professor Povinelli explains how intimacy and the body can become pivotal sites from which to theorize these adaptive liberal normativities and logics. She dislocates the conventional discursive divisions for analyzing inequalities – agency/oppression, self-sovereignty/determination, – and in so doing diverges from traditional feminist approaches showing how the distinction between self-authorizing freedom and the imagining of social constraint is in itself the core, as well as an effect, of liberal segmentations of the world. Because she has achieved an anthropological stance radically emancipated from identitary limitations and in light of her ability to render the complexity of fluid materialities and “thick” socialities, Elizabeth A. Povinelli is among anthropology's most thought-provoking contemporary thinkers.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli is Professor in the Department of Anthropology and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University. She is a former editor of the journal Public Culture. Among numerous publications, she is the author of The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism (2002) and The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality (2006).

In your last book, The Empire of Love (2006a) you make a conceptual distinction between “carnality” and “corporeality”. How do you pose the sexual body through that distinction?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: *Empire of Love* makes a distinction between “carnality” and “corporeality” for a set of analytical reasons: to try to understand materiality in late liberal forms of power and to try to make the body matter in post-essentialist thought. If we think with Foucault then we understand that objects are object-effects, that authors are author-effects, that subjects are subject-effects, and that states are state-effects. And if we think after the critique of metaphysics of substance, say with Judith Butler, then we no longer think that the quest is to find substances in their pre-discursive authenticity. Instead we try to think how substances are produced. I believe we are now accustomed to thinking like this. But something paradoxical happened on the way to learning about object-effects and learning how to critique the metaphysics of substance: the world became rather plastic and the different, I would say, “modalities of materiality” were evacuated from our analysis. It left some of us with questions like: How can we grasp some of the qualities of a material object that is nevertheless a discursive object? How can we talk about subject-effects and object-effects without making materiality disappear or making its different manifestations irrelevant to the unequal organization of social life? How can we simultaneously recognize that discourse makes objects appear, that it does so under different material conditions, and that the matter that matters from discourse is not identical to discourse? Of course, this is a slippery path; the peril is that we will fall back into metaphysics of substance.

So this is some of the thinking on which *The Empire of Love* distinguishes between “carnality” and “corporeality”. “Corporeality” would be the way in which dominant forms of power shape and reshape materiality, how discourses produce categories and divisions between categories – human, non-human, person, non-person, body, sex, etc. – and “carnality” would be the material manifestations of that discourse which are neither discursive nor pre-discursive. When we talk about sexuality, but also about race and the body, I think this analytic distinction matters. In *The Empire of Love*, I first try to show how it matters and second how difficult it is to speak about those material matters without falling back into a metaphysics of substance. For instance, in the first chapter of *The Empire of Love*, “Rotten Worlds,” I track how a sore on my body is discursively produced, but multiply discursively produced. And how the multiple discursive productions of this sore are simultaneously a production of socialities and social obligations. Sores are endemic in the indigenous communities in which I have been working for the last twenty-five years or so in north Australia. If I put my trust in the people whom I have known better than almost anybody else in my life, I would say that my sore came from contact with a particular Dreaming, from a particular ancestral site

(which is not ancestral because it is alive). But this belief – or perhaps I should say – stating this belief as a truth isn't supported by the world as it is currently organized; or, it is supported only if they and I agree that this truth is “merely” a cultural belief. But if the sore is thought of as staphylococcus or as anthrax or as the effect of the filthiness of Aboriginal communities, as it has been by physicians in Montreal or Chicago or Darwin, then this thought meets a world which treats it as truth: as fact. These ways of examining the sore would fall under the concept of corporeality: how is the body and its illnesses being shaped by multiple, often incommensurate discourses; how are these discourses of inclusion and exclusion always already shaping and differentiating bodies, socialities and social obligations: mine and my indigenous colleagues?

And yet the concept of corporeality is not sufficient. Whether the sore is an eruption of a Dreaming or the effect of poor health care and housing and structures of racism, it still sickens the body and depending how one's body has been cared for, or is being cared for, it sickens it in different ways and to different degrees. Over time, sores such as the one I had on my shoulder and discussed in *Empire* often lead to heart valve problems, respiratory problems, etc. for my Indigenous friends. In other words, no matter what the sore is from a discursive point of view, no matter what causes it to appear as “thing,” the sore also slowly sickens a body and a material corrodes a form of life. And this slow corrosion of the life is part of the reason why, if you are Indigenous in Australia, your life runs out much sooner than non-Indigenous Australians. And if the state provides you rights based on longevity – think here of the stereotype of the old traditional person – but you are dying on average ten to twenty years sooner than non-Indigenous people, then the carnal condition of your body is out of sync with the apparatus of cultural recognition. But this body-out-of-sync is a more complex matter than merely the discourse that has produced it, nor is it going merely where discourse directs it. Carnality therefore becomes vital to understanding the dynamics of power. I would say that Brian Massumi (2002) and Rosi Braidotti (2002) are engaged in similar projects. But my theoretical, conceptual interlocutors are a more motley crew: American pragmatism, Chicago meta-pragmatics, Foucault, Deleuze, late Wittgenstein, Heidegger and his concept of precognitive interpretation, what Bourdieu borrowed and turned into *doxa*. All of these folks are in a conversation in two important ways: First, they assume the immanent nature of social life and, second, they are interested in the organization and disorganization, the channeling and blockage of immanent social life. I take for granted that there is otherwise everywhere in the world, the question for me is: what are the institutions that make certain forms of otherwise invisible and impractical? And one answer takes me to the corporeal and the other to the carnal.

So when I think about sexuality and race I think about them through this dual materiality. I think about sexuality and race primarily as corporeal regimes. And when I think of them as corporeal regimes then the question for me is what are the discourses that shape and reshape the flesh and its affects. This is where the civilizational division between the autological subject and the genealogical subject comes into the picture. Your body and mine might be female, but this discursive fold is apprehended differently than my female friends in Australia because striated through gender, sexual and racial difference is another discursive division of late liberalism: the divide between the autological subject and the genealogical subject.

To say that the autological/genealogical divide is the configuration of institutional power prior to the sexual divide seems confrontational to feminism?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: Certainly in *The Empire of Love*, but also across my writings, I have kind of stubbornly refused to say how my work relates to feminism. In fact, *Empire of Love* begins in a somewhat confrontational way, not exactly with feminism, but with sexuality, sexual theory and queer theory. I say that I am not interested in sexuality or the women question or for that matter the race question in the abstract, I am interested in them only in so far as they are what organizes, disorganizes and distributes power and difference. Of course, I think this makes me a feminist – and certainly a queer! But when I think about what organizes, disorganizes and distributes power and difference then I am led to a set of more intractable issues, below a certain field of visibility as defined by identity categories. And these issues cut across liberal forms of intimacies, the market and politics. These concrete formations of liberal power took me to the division of the autological subject and genealogical society rather than to the sexual division.

Is it because you feel that the sex/gender question is a liberal question?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: What I find a liberal question is not the sex/gender question but the organization of “identity” (whether sex, sexuality, gender or race) on the basis of a fantasy of self-authorizing freedom. By self-authorizing freedom I mean the bootstrap relationship between the “I” of enunciation and the “I” enunciating- what do I think, what do I desire, I am what I am, I am what I want. And the trouble with this form of bootstrap performativity is not merely that it is a phantasmagorical figure of liberalism but that it continually projects its opposite into the worlds of others. What is projected is the equally phantasmagorical figure of the genealogical society – society as a thing that threatens to control and determine my relation to myself. Thus “freedom” and its “threat” are co-constituted. The freedom of the autological subject, on which demands for same-sex marriage or self-elaborated gender identity are based, is always pivoted against fantasies of communities lacking this performative form of freedom. And just to be clear, I do not believe that there are actually genealogical societies and autological societies. Instead there is a demand that one give an account of what she is doing in terms of this discursive division. In other words, the division of the autological subject and genealogical society is not about differences in the world. It is about a differential spacing of the world. Thus sex/gender, sexuality and other forms of difference aren’t liberal per se. They become liberal when they are organized through this late liberal division and become legitimate vis-à-vis this division.

Why did you choose love and intimacy as the place from which to discern these liberal processes of legitimation?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: I will answer by referring to something I tried to show in *The Cunning of Recognition* (2002a), which I think of as the prequel to *Empire of Love*. The first step to understanding about the relationship between love, intimacy and liberal legitimation is understanding what is being legitimated. *Cunning* argues that what is being legitimated is liberal exceptionalism. Liberals state that liberal forms of power are world historical in so far as they adjudicate difference on the basis of public reason. But in actual instances of adjudication liberal ways of governing difference do not proceed

purely through the rhythms of public reason and deliberate rationality. When liberals experience themselves as facing an instance of a so-called morally repugnant form of life then they insist that not all forms of life should be allowed to exist – and to be given the dignity of public reason. Too much difference is said to lie outside reasonable disagreement. (The political theorist, Michael Walzer's (2004) work is exemplary of these approaches.) This is an irresolvable limit internal to liberalism's account of itself. So in *Cunning* I was interested in how recognition projects this internal liberal tension between public reason and moral sense onto the subject of recognition and says to her, "you figure out how to be different enough so we can feel you are not me, but not so different that I am forced to annihilate you and thereby fracture the foundation of my exceptionalism."

In *Empire* I became more interested in the discursive content of the liberal governance of difference, rather than merely its interactional dynamic, and in the dispersed sites of liberal governance. This is why I ask, How do we practice our deep, thick everyday lives so that we continually perpetuate the way that liberalism governs difference, even when we seem to be doing nothing more than kissing our lover goodbye? The small routines of intimacy are for me an anchor point to thinking late liberalism because every time we kiss our lover goodbye within liberal worlds, we project into the world the difference between the autological subject (the recursive ideology of the subject of freedom, the subject that chooses her life), and the genealogical society (the supra-individual agency threatening to condition our choice). The intimate event is an anchor point because it seems to me to be the densest, smallest knot where the irrevocable unity of this division is expressed. What do I mean by an irrevocable unity? In the intimate event the subject says two things simultaneously. On the one hand, the subject says "this is my love, nobody can choose it for me, I am the author of my intimacy." Love is thereby treated as uniquely and unequivocally autological. Forget Marx, the only thing that we have that is really ours is love! But at the same time, the subject also thinks, feels, evaluates love in terms of its radical unchosen quality: "love happens, I fall in love, I hope it happens to me," like I were struck by lightning. And the intimate event is an unavoidable anchor point. Even those people who might say that they will not love, that they hate love, that they do not want to love, must have to have a relationship to love.

We understand that liberalism needs love to be projected in social forms of constraint such as marriage, but why is this particular metaphysical, almost magical ideology of love needed?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: In love, the subject paradoxically realizes that she is never only autological; that "something" like an event of lightning has to happen to her which is out of her control, whether this event comes from the outside or from an inside so internal that it might as well be outside. Love is where the autological subject expresses herself most profoundly and where genealogical constraint expresses itself more purely. So it is right there that you can see the liberal division that organizes social life collapse into itself and then explode outward. Paradoxically it is in the moment the divide collapses in the intimate event that the differences between civilizational orders seem clearest to liberal subjects. The moment the liberal subject of love, the liberal subject in love, experiences her inability to author the event of love, she insists there is a vast and insurmountable difference between societies of freedom and societies of social constraint. One is tempted to become a psychoanalyst

to explain this. And no wonder it seems metaphysical. But it is coming from within and setting up specific social orders.

Social orders such as the ones set up by identity politics?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: Yes. One of the reasons why I wanted to write *The Cunning of Recognition* was to start to push back against the seductions of identity. I started graduate school in the eighties with a background in philosophy. I majored in the great books program at St. John's College in Santa Fe. I then went to Australia on a fellowship. At the time, I didn't really know what being an anthropologist consisted of. But the indigenous friends I made in Australia needed an anthropologist because under the Land Rights Act, a piece of legislation that allowed indigenous Australian's to sue for the return of their land, indigenous groups had to be represented by an anthropologist and a lawyer – but I had no intention of becoming a lawyer! So I left aside my “great” books and entered graduate school at Yale in anthropology. This was 1986. So, I entered anthropology at exactly the moment when anthropology, like many other disciplines, was reflecting on its enmeshment in worlds of power, including colonialism and imperialism. And then *Writing Culture* came out. So huge fights were breaking out with people accusing other people of racism, colonialism, homophobia, objectivism, scientism. One response to these charges was the collapse of the object of study into the identity of the studier. Many tremendous studies have come out of this maneuver. But what was lost was how the critique of power might impact at a deeper, richer level with immanent forms of social obligation beyond given articulations of identity. The threat was that everyone became merely what identity-form existed, and in the most deracinated of ways. No one is merely the given-form of identity. Every identity is shot through with unnamable networks of deep unspecifiable, unnamable obligation. And these nonreferential forms of obligation were abandoned. It's not that obligation is devoid of formations of power. Power organizes even our truest obligations, no matter our good intentions, no matter our desires. But how does one think the relationship between power and obligation, rather than retreat into one's identity? How does one inhabit these more awkward worlds of obligation and analyze the differentials of power shooting through them? The reflexive gesture seems radically insufficient for this analysis, for the task of this analysis isn't to think about oneself or one's personal history. It is to think about how to remain in the obligations that we find ourselves responding to and at the same time understand the arts of governance that disrupt and contain and redirect these immanent modes of obligation.

Can you speak more about how you use “modes of obligation”? I understand it as pointing to structures of “choice” vs. “non-choice”, “choosers” vs. “non-choosers”?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: What is interesting about obligation is that it constitutes a no man's land between choice and determination. Obligation is not determination. Being obliged to something does not mean you are determined by it. It is a much richer form of relationality, a continual nurturing, or caring for, bindings that are often initially very delicate spaces of connectivity. I think if one is opened to the world – and by that I just mean being alive and having one's senses intact! – one will find oneself drawn to something, to a somewhere, to be bound to it without having known one was. We then call this someone or thing or where to intensify this binding; or,

obligation is another's call that we decide to bind ourselves to. Again, this "being drawn to" is often initially a very fragile connection, a sense of an immanent connectivity. Choices are then made to enrich and intensify these connections – or these are described retrospectively as choices! – even as, as one binds deeper, she is herself transformed. And this is really what I mean by obligation. I might be able to describe why I am drawn to a particular space and I may try to nurture this obligation or to break away from it, but still I have very little that can be described as "choice" in the original orientation. Indeed obligation is a space within which neither choice nor determination is an adequate synonym.

You wrote about Genet's Querelle de Brest (1953 [1947]) in Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality (2002b). If we cut ourselves from thoughts on identity, recognition or deliberative democracy, how can an experiment in ethics of radical loneliness similar to Querelle's still maintain roots or connections in these obligations?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: This is a question that re-emerged recently at a queer theory conference where Lee Edelman and I were plenary speakers. Lee Edelman (1994), and Leo Bersani (1996), who has written so provocatively about Genet, thinks the queer against the common, the communitarian. The queer for them refers to the practices or events of radical social, psychic, and epistemological disruption. They understand the queer to be located in (or to be) the unclosable gaps that open in discourse, psyche and epistemology, say between rhetoric and grammar. In these spaces all forms of normality are shattered and no new hegemonic forms have yet emerged. So, queering would be the shattering of a given sociality, identity, or community without the desire or promise of a new sociality, identity, or community. In Bersani's way of putting it, queer moments are moments in which the self is liquified.

Honestly, I personally find these spaces, these moments, exhilarating. But I worry that a blanket valorization of these moments of liquification, shattering, and dissolving dangerously undertheorizes the unity of such shattering. What are the consequences of this kind of shattering if you are indigenous in Australia, when your life is already shattered, is shattering all of the time, and not because you are Querelle perusing the docks but because the liberal structures, said to recognize your worth, are instead constantly shattering your life-world? Thus, I think queer theory needs to do two things. First, yes, it needs to define queer on the basis of the shattering of subjectivity and the sheering of normativity, but also, second, it needs to demonstrate how this shattering is not itself a unified phenomena. Indigenous friends of mine might live in zones of liquification, but their "queerness" is of a very different sort than my queerness. My liquifications might well help enhance my life, whereas theirs might not.

So do you wish to add a little incommunicability?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: And stir?! Well. I wish to understand the goods and harms of communicability itself and to understand how these goods and harms are always already socially distributed. So some groups seek to be incommunicable – or incommensurate – while others are structurally located within the incommensurate spaces of late liberalism. Their *logos* are made noise, made incommunicable, even if they are trying to communicate. And you

see how different this is from Querelle's queer cultivating of an incommunicable self. And if queer theory doesn't acknowledge this difference it flattens the social field. I love Genet's *Querelle*, but one must understand that the benefits and harms of living a shattered life are socially distributed. Again, this is why I am interested in both corporeality and carnality. One can celebrate Querelle's life on the docks. One can celebrate the docks in New York in the seventies. One can celebrate the various otherwhises that emerge in indigenous communities. But what is it to live these various forms of life from a carnal point of view? What are the outcomes for bodies and assemblages of bodies?

Can you talk a little bit about the manner in which you wrote about your own body in Empire of Love?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: Yes. There are three chapters in the book and each one is written in a different voice and from a different point of view. The first chapter is written in the first person, as descriptively close as possible to the given time of my peregrinations. The thought was: how can I analyze the social world from a two-dimensional point of view – what would the world look like if I were unable to get above it, to get any horizontal perspective on it, if I did not immediately jump to a meta-discursive point of view. The second chapter is written in the impersonal “I”. The third chapter is more explicitly meta-discursive. The reason I tried to differentiate these narrative voices and points of view was to performatively entail the different manner in which power operates at the level of the person: how it creates individuals and threats to individuality; how it shapes the distinction between the autological subject and the genealogical society in ways that have nothing to do with the person and her personality; how it is radically personal and radically impersonal at the same time. So the idea was not to write self-reflexively. It was to make the explicit argument as well as rhetorically perform the argument that power operates at these various levels – the personal, the impersonal person, the machinery of the person-making.

In What's Love Got to Do with It? (2006b), you wrote about how “violence against women” is used as an excuse for genealogizing indigenous communities. Can you explain how you understand this resort to violence and sexual violence in liberal arguments?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: Let me answer that question by first providing a certain intellectual history to how I think about violence. At the University of Chicago there was a group called the Late Liberalism Group. The members were Michael Warner, Saba Mahmood, Lauren Berlant, Candace Vogler, Elaine Hadley, Rolph Trouillot, Patchen Markell and myself. One of the things we were puzzling about was how to think violence diagonally to liberal accounts of violence. How do we refuse the way liberalism divides violence and non-violence? How do we penetrate violence, acknowledge it outside of definitions of violence engendered by liberal arts of governance? That was the framework within which I began to think about violence, which is such a sticky matter. Violence is not – any more than the queer – an ontological category that we can define and then correlate to objects in the world according to how well they fit the definition. Violence is organized by liberal discourses, such as the autological/genealogical divide. And one of the ways I try to angle into violence is by moving away from violence and thinking about care, how forms of what constitutes care have shifted in the movement from liberalism to

neoliberalism. For one thing there is a shift in the location of care – from the Keynesian state which provided a minimal level of care, minimal level of vitality, to those most in need, to the current neoliberal state that removes this cellar of care and shifts the responsibilities of care from the state to the individual. Foucault began teasing out this shift in *Naissance de la biopolitique* (2004 [1979]). He argued that neoliberalism is not *laissez-faire* anymore. It is not about leaving the market alone. It is about aggressively expanding the logic of the market to all aspects of life so that the market principles actually become human principles that organize life, government, intimacy, etc. Thus, in neoliberalism “caring for others” becomes removing the social resources of care and inserting market evaluations and values. The arts of governance use the same word across the shift, “care,” but the social organization of care has changed dramatically.

This shift makes certain statements impractical and infelicitous. Certain statements do not have practical traction in the world. Why don't we think that removing social welfare is a form of state killing? Especially when the neoliberal state says that its way of “caring” will make life unviable for many. “Life is going to get much worse,” we are told, “but just wait and then things will get better.” Why do we think of this as care and not as state abuse? How long are we willing to give neoliberal forms of care-as-ervation before we are willing to call them a form of killing? But even if we did name this form of care as a form of abuse, our statement cannot do anything practical in the world if all the social fields of that world – intimacy, market, child rearing, etc – are organized around the same neoliberal model of care.

When it comes to the difference between, let us say, feminists who oppose violence against women and Querelle who craves violence as a form of de-subjectification, we must be extremely careful to differentiate the social grounds of these desires in the same way. Take for example how violence against women was used as a justification for attacking Afghanistan. One reason it was difficult to mobilize a counter discourse was that opposing the government's protection of women was treated as if it were support for violence against women, as if these were two sides of the same coin. Of course, violence against women is not acceptable! But if we turn away from the problem of violence and look at the social grounds and purpose of violence we see something quite different. Take another example. We are currently witnessing a radical federal intervention in Indigenous governance in Australia. A government report noted the horrific conditions of life in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The report stated that *in the worst cases* these horrific conditions have led to child sexual abuse. More or less than anywhere else? Nobody knows. And the report didn't say. Nor did it quantify its claim about child sex abuse. But the federal conservative government stoked a sex panic to legitimate a neoliberal reorganization of social welfare, a seizure of indigenous lands, and sent troops into indigenous communities to take control over community affairs. It is hard to explain how, in such a short interview, but the federal government and its policy supporters were able to convince the public that the cause of this sexual abuse was traditional Indigenous culture. As a result, the government was extremely successful in disrupting hegemonic alliances on the left, because the only question that could be asked or answered became: “are you for or against indigenous children sex abuse?”! Of course it is not about that, but there was no escape. No matter what you say and no matter how you say it, you are read in relation to the sex panic. When you say it is a sex panic used to justify a governmental intervention, people answer: “so you are for sexual abuse of

children"! Exactly like violence against women and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. So these are the kinds of liberal and neoliberal imaginaries of violence and care against which we need to think.

Violence and sex!

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: Yes. So the question for me is, like sex, how do you tackle the problematic of violence without already acceding to the terms that liberalism sets for what is violent and what is nonviolent, even as liberalism itself shifts forms—classical *laissez-faire* liberalism to Keynesian liberalism to neoliberalism.

Clearly the agency/constraint, individual/society question is not a pertinent question for anthropology to ask. What is a good question according to you?

Elizabeth A. Povinelli: If we take the example of this federal intervention in Australia, we see clearly how shifts occur in the definitions of both the agency/constraint and individual society division. Liberal recognition first stated that it cared for indigenous people by enclosing them in culture. But the form of "culture" liberalism recognized was genealogical. Members of Aboriginal communities were cared for through culture but culture as determination and as opposed to subjects of freedom. The recent federal intervention has conserved this division even as it has inverted the value of genealogy. The federal intervention maintained the distinction between the people of freedom and the people of cultural determination. But now Indigenous culture is the cause of Indigenous pathology rather than the cure for it.

So a good question for me would be one that opened a new line of thinking such as how we might rethink the spaces of the otherwise in terms of obligation and care or endurance and exhaustion or refusal and persistence.

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