



INTERVIEW

Virus as a figure of geontopower or how to practice Foucault now?

A conversation with Elizabeth A. Povinelli

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Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Franz Boas Professor at Columbia University, is a philosopher and anthropologist who has critically engaged with Michel Foucault's ideas as well as scholarship inspired by his works. Povinelli has been dedicated to research on colonialism within liberalism and is also a filmmaker and founding member of The Karrabing Film Collective. The film collective is part of a larger organization of Aboriginal peoples and artists living in the Australian Northern Territory that refuses 'fantasies of sovereignty and property'.¹

As Povinelli shares with us during the interview, her trajectory was constituted in the middle of the 1980s following her life-changing encounter with the elders in Belyuen in the Australian Northern Territory. In the wake of that encounter, and with urgent issues raised about indigeneity due to changes in Australian law, Povinelli has been working even closer with her Karrabing family. The changes in law both acknowledged Aboriginal peoples' rights to their territory and imposed certain ideas of identity, family and culture, producing an entanglement between rights and government. These efforts to manage differences – cultural, race, gender – are problematized and deciphered in Povinelli's ethnographic work with a focus on how late settler liberalism has been reconfigured with novel expressions of colonialism and imperialism. Now embedded within

¹ Karrabing Indigenous Corporation, Karrabing, <https://karrabing.info/mapping>, (accessed July 20, 2023)

indigeneity, these problems are continuously under change, leading to new research frontiers inspired by Povinelli's work.

In *Geontologies: Requiem for Late Liberalism*, Povinelli has explored what she analyses as three figures of power (in reference to the four figures of sexuality discussed by Michel Foucault)² that have been discernible since the 1960s' political struggles. During this time, new social movements, environmental movements and anti-colonial struggles³ introduced a whole set of problems that confront different incarnations of liberalism. This moment, which could be understood as leading to increased tensions for governmentality, made other power dynamics apparent. Neither explainable solely with the conceptual tools of biopower nor necropower, Povinelli advances conceptualization of these accentuated power relations through the idea of 'geontopower':

The simplest way of sketching the difference between geontopower and biopower is that the former does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.⁴

When late liberalism is analyzed from spaces marked by settler colonialism, it becomes apparent that government through difference is embedded in the geo-ontological distinctions between Life and Nonlife, which authorizes colonial power to deny the status of participants of worlds and forms of life to elements of the territory (such as mountains, rivers or rocks) and to relegate some peoples to the condition of cultural and/or social fossils. The distinction between Life and Nonlife, according to Povinelli, is a very productive one and has been used in colonial spaces to destroy worlds and lives in the name of commodities.

Even though geontopower has long been recognizable from the margins of the Euro-Atlantic world, the discussion about climate change and, most of all, the Anthropocene has made geontopower increasingly visible globally. One of these figures of geontopower is the Virus, which is defined as:

[...] the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that it is a difference that makes no difference *not because* all is alive, vital, and potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving, inert, dormant, and enduring. Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus, it can use and ignore this division for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself. The Virus copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances.⁵

Because of the effects of figuring certain events and tactics through the Virus – this Non-life that behaves so it can duplicate and “survive” – Povinelli calls our attention to how it connects to

² When considering Foucault's discussion during the 1975 lectures, it is possible to understand “figure” as that which appears within certain domains (anomalies or sexuality, for example) and as examinable in order to better understand how different systems of power/knowledge come together and lead to new strategic formations. It is neither an abstract idea nor a metaphor but the effect of discursive and non-discursive practices of government at a certain time. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975* [1999] (2003).

³ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: Requiem for Late Liberalism* (2016).

⁴ Povinelli, *Geontologies: Requiem for Late Liberalism*, 17.

⁵ Ibid. 36-7.

practices of biosecurity that are invested in closely regulating external and internal frontiers so it always remains possible to recognize the “pathological agent” as soon as possible, preventing it from doing any damage to lives and forms of life protected by biopower.

Having proposed the Virus as a figure of geontopower before the outbreak of what became called the COVID-19 pandemic, Povinelli emphasized the usefulness of her analytical figure for understanding the global effects of Sars-Cov-2 as a biological virus. In an article published in November of 2020, when we were still in the midst of these ‘re-infected’ power relations, she thus clarified how COVID-19 had become:

a figure of geontology’s failure to govern in such a way that the values of capital extraction flow primarily into the white North while the toxicities that are produced along the way remain within the primarily brown and black global South. In other words, the relays between the figure of the Virus and the actual Sars-Cov-2 virus become increasing rapid and ever more important to disentangle.

Here, Povinelli is calling out attention to how the Virus, as a figure of late settler-liberalism, was a mode of rendering visible tactics and practices at work in the margins of the Euro-Atlantic world. Some of those tactics and practices aimed to maintain the very separation between spaces of Life and forms of life valued as important and those that could be explored for their “natural resources”, even if this meant (as it often did) extinguishing lives and forms of life. By referring to “geontology’s failure”, Povinelli seems to suggest that the biological Sars-Cov-2 virus has proved that, in times of climate change, the separation no longer holds, at least not all of the time. That is why a virus confronted parts of the global North with the everyday worries that occupy minds and hearts of people living in the global south: worries about surviving, about conditions of living, getting sick and dying; worries about the very possibility of enduring. During the interview, Povinelli comments on these economies of fatigue; a very operative mode of managing the demands that counter what Rob Nixon has named as slow-violence.⁶

Finally, we would like to highlight two aspects of Povinelli’s work that were also brought up during the interview. First, she insists that her reading of Foucault (and other canonical authors) is empirically (and inextricably) connected to the questions raised during interactions with the peoples in Belyuen. The lived experience she has been sharing with them, for almost four decades, brings forth a unique potentiality to re-think power relations.⁷ She also comments on this aspect, saying that “In short, geontopower is not a concept first and an application to my friends’ worlds second, but a concept that emerges from what late liberal governance looks like from this cramped

⁶ Rob Nixon has proposed the concept of slow violence to confront “... conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound” (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2011: 3). Thus, the concept aims to render visible the kind of damage that may or may not be associated to a specific event and that unfolds during large periods of time, such as the aftermath of a nuclear bomb or the long-lasting consequences of dam breaks. Ahmann (“It’s exhausting to create an event out of nothing”: slow violence and the manipulation of time. *Cultural Anthropology* 33:1, 2018) takes the concept to discuss the difficulties of enduring slow violence and organizing against it, referring specifically to the exhaustion of trying to make damage appear as such (in the public sphere or before a legal court); it usually takes a lot of effort to make a case and start the process of responsabilization. Nixon suggests the concept is very pertinent in Anthropocene times as it enlightens “... transnational questions arising from the borderlands between empire, neoliberalism, environmentalism, and social justice” (Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 31).

⁷ See also Kevin J. Grove, “Security beyond resilience,” *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 35:1 (2017).

space”.⁸ Second, it is important to read her analyses of political consequences as detached from presumed binaries, especially when she is trying to think the Virus as an analytical figure unmarked by moral agency and, therefore, not easily framed in terms of friend-enemy (even if that was the language used by politicians when confronted with the biological virus of Sars-Cov-2). This partly echoes other contemporary authors, such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Anna Tsing, who have been trying to work with ethics that unfold the ontological and epistemic crises revealed by the Anthropocene. To use Haraway’s terms,⁹ it is possible to understand Povinelli’s attempt to “stay with the problem” and face political dilemmas that appear when thought is embedded in lived experiences of the self and others. This empirical focus differs from how Michel Foucault genealogically traced how things could have been constituted differently. Similarly to Foucault, however, Povinelli does not resort to the pre-existence of conventional binaries, universal *versus* local, good *versus* bad, but rather focuses on the multiple ways in which separations are made between Life and Non-Life (which is not a “natural” one). Beyond Foucault, this perspective opens up for the possible recognition of other, neglected existences and political imaginations of practical importance for communities that wish to take decisions differently. By refusing sovereignty and proprietary thinking as defined by late liberalism, Povinelli shows how other consequences for life and non-life emerge, which highlights potentiality – as yet unknown existences for non-human and more-than-human worlds.

The interview took place online, January 13th, 2023, during two hours of vivid discussions. Povinelli engaged with our questions, bringing to life her encounters with Michel Foucault’s work and re-creating a path for her own intellectual interest over the years. A recurrent theme was how she returned to Michel Foucault’s works over time to read the same texts differently depending on accumulating lived experience. As she clarifies, she was not mainly orienting her authorial self in accordance with her reading of Foucault as an anthropologist but in accordance with her own becoming as an anthropologist committed to her Karrabing family. It was by sharing their form of life that she could decode the practices and tactics of settler colonial government to then commit to the endurance of the otherwise, not only in the past but also in the future.

INTERVIEW

*Beth, thank you so much for engaging with us. We are very happy that this interview is part of this special issue. Maybe we can start with the question of when and how you first encountered Foucault’s work?*¹⁰

I have a visual memory of my first encounter with Foucault. It was the first English translation of *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, I think,¹¹ published in 1980. The cover was an image of Adam and Eve eating the apple. But I didn’t read it in 1980. I was a freshman at St. John’s College, Santa Fe, which prides itself on its “great books” curriculum. There’s also a campus in Annapolis, Maryland. But Santa Fe was a perfect place to study the Western canon because of its location at the intersection of multiple forms of colonial struggles -- what

⁸ *Geontologies*, 18.

⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016).

¹⁰ All questions presented by interviewers are marked in italic. The footnotes were introduced by the interviewee during the process of editing, unless marked otherwise.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* [1976] (1980).

we then called Hispanic, Anglo and Native Americans, both Navajo and Hopi, maneuvers within the legacies of the US. It was a complex social and political scene. And I was there right before Santa Fe turned into an open-air art mall.

I didn't read Foucault until I arrived at Yale University in 1986 – I think I probably read it in 1987, I can't really remember. I'd never heard of him.

I ended up at Yale after having spent a year in Australia, at the Belyuen Community, a small Indigenous community just across the Darwin harbor in the Northern Territory of Australia. My earliest conversations with the two generations above me, what would be my parents' and grandparents' generations, reminded me of my own paternal grandparents' discussion of our ancestral village in Carisolo, Trentino, Italy, something I have tackled in *The Inheritance*, but for our discussion here it might be interesting for readers to look at "Relations, Obligations, Divergences".¹² Anyways, these generations of Indigenous men and women were in the midst of this very divisive land claim. They were trying to regain control over their lands but had to do so in the context of the federal *Aboriginal Lands Rights (NT) Act, 1976*, heavily influenced by mid-twentieth century conservative social anthropology.¹³ Under this Act, Indigenous claimants must be represented by a lawyer and an anthropologist. At the end of my year there, the older women and men asked me to be their lawyer—a profession I had been running away from for a long time. So, they said, why don't you go and become an anthropologist and help us understand white governance? In other words, they didn't want me to study them, but they wanted me to help study settler power. I didn't know what an anthropologist was. Hell, I didn't know what a discipline was. There were no disciplines at St Johns. The only disciplines I really understood were lawyer, doctor and engineer. I asked my younger brother, who I vaguely thought did anthropology (he is a primatologist), and he explained cultural anthropology. So we applied together to various universities. He and I ended up at Yale.

It was at Yale that I ran into Foucault, but not in Anthropology. I encountered him around 1987 through my queer friends that were in English, Comparative Literature, and this new emergent field called queer studies. The copy of *History of Sexuality* that I read was passed from hand to hand. I still have my copy somewhere. The marginalia in it is multiple-authored. Remember, this was at the cusp of portable computers.

Thank you for sharing this encounter, but we would also like to know how it was to read Foucault at this point?

The graduate network at Yale that was passing around *History of Sexuality, Vol 1* was mainly focused on the question of sexuality rather than biopolitics per se. Obviously one can't separate the two. Still, many of my friends were wondering how the four figures of biopolitics might inflect the emergent idea of queerness as an antinormative form of

¹² Elisabeth Povinelli, *The Inheritance* (2021); Elisabeth Povinelli, "Relations, Obligations, Divergences," *World Records Journal* 7:4 (n/d).

¹³ See especially chapters 4 and 5 in Elisabeth Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterity and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (2002).

sociality and sexuality. I was certainly interested in the same, even if, because of why I was in graduate school, namely to become not merely an anthropologist but a thinker whose job would be to study settler governance, I couldn't help but read *History of Sexuality* through this latter problematic, namely ongoing colonialism. So initially I was as interested in how Foucault represented the difference between the "deployment of alliance" and "the deployment of sexuality", namely, governance through kinship, marriage, and descent and governance through the truth of sexuality and pleasure. On the one hand, at the time, we were witnessing a globalization of queer mobility and of liberal gay and lesbian rights—that is, a globalization of two modes of the liberation of sexuality, to use Foucault's language. One focused more on a constant difference from normativity and the other focused more on identity and inclusion. I was and continue to be aligned in this older queer formation for better or worse. In any case, in the global north of the 1980s and 90s, the deployment of sexuality did seem like what comes *after* alliance, like a modern form of sociality, like a new way of making kin through sexuality rather than sexuality being a result of kinship and descent.

But what was felt as a movement forward, as progress, in the global north was felt differently in other regions.

Now, remember, I had only known everybody in Belyuen, Australia for about two or three years when I first started reading Foucault. Still, it was striking how, if you looked at his argument from a colonial point of view—if one shifted from thinking sexuality/bi-politics from a historical framework to a spatial one—alliance appeared in two different ways. First, the deployment of alliance Foucault was discussing was a deployment of a modern theory of alliance on western forms of premodern sociality. Second, this deployment of a western modern theory of itself was then deployed against colonized peoples. It was as if *everyone* everywhere had only two choices—to be within the deployment of alliance (what I would later call the genealogical society) or sexuality (the autological subject).¹⁴ Why were these the two choices? Who said so? Why? How did this division act differently on the colonized and colonizer? Could we read the body outside domination of sexuality and alliance?

That said, I found it very productive to read *The History of Sexuality* against itself, to come to understand it as an account of the West's understanding of itself, as something formed *sui generis* rather than, as colonial critics like Aimé Césaire noted during the same period, as a counter-formation to its savage actions elsewhere. This way of reading remained useful when I began tackling his lectures on governance of self and others.¹⁵

So, if we understood your answer in relation to this question on the problematic part correctly, this reading of Foucault demanded you to rethink some of his ideas but, at the same time, it helped you to see some things?

¹⁴ Elisabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (2006); Elisabeth Povinelli, "Sexual Savages/Sexual Sovereignty: Australian Colonial Texts and the Postcolonial Politics of Nationalism," *Diacritics* 24:2-3 (1994).

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983* [2008] (2010).

It's one of those moments when one thinks, "Oh, this is not right, but it's not wrong" because it is very accurate in the way modern western sexual subjects project truth into themselves and onto others. So, my question was not, how do we apply Foucault? But, how do we listen to him in a new way? A way that he himself perhaps couldn't hear. I was hardly the only one. Ann Laura Stoler was asking, "where's race and the history of empire?" I was interested in the deployment of western understandings of alliance into settler colonial spaces. How did Foucault's thinking about alliance reflect how anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss, one of the towering *fathers* of structuralism that Foucault sought to topple, think about kinship, marriage and descent? How were these and other western models deployed in colonial spaces?

So you think also that, with anthropology, you were able to be closer to lived experience?

Ah, anthropology. I am often asked about anthropology as if it came first and then came my relations with my Indigenous family Belyuen and in Karrabing. But the reverse is true. One of the disciplinary formations of anthropology has been extraordinarily useful to me, to us, namely, the idea that to know a social region one must dwell within it. This foundational methodology could be radicalized from a way of conducting research to a way of sustaining an obligation to a place, a people. It wasn't *anthropology* that forced me to read Foucault in a certain way. It was my Indigenous colleagues who forced me to think differently about him. Let's put the agency where it belongs. Anthropology wasn't the agency that allowed me to engage Foucault in the way I have. It has been the generations of Belyuen Karrabing who made me understand anthropology, Foucault, and western disciplinarity differently. This issue of agent is really important because it forces us to pay attention to whom we are giving power. A discipline or a social world? William James notes a similar point, if in a different context. Who is likely to come up with the concept we need to alter our world—the philosopher who contemplates from his hermetically sealed study or the persons who live its grinding contradictions? And the question is not, merely, where do concepts emerge? But, who has the energy to materialize them?¹⁶

I became an anthropologist and continued to return every year to Belyuen and their surrounding lands, at increasing rates over the years, because I found myself obligated to a now deceased group of women and their demands on me, then their children, then their children's children and onwards, until now I have great grandchildren to whom I am obligated. I try to think from where they are, how concepts look and work from their worlds and, of course, how I am entangled in them. Was it because, as I mentioned above, they so reminded me of my father's side of the family from Carisolo? Because their vision of ethical conduct with their human and more than human kin so compelled me? Whatever the reason, I think it is very important to ask: who or what are we doing

¹⁶ Elisabeth Povinelli, "The Will to Be Otherwise/The Effort of Endurance," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111:3 (2012).

academic/critical thinking for? How can we use or deform these epistemological tools to redirect agency and effort?

As I said, I didn't encounter Foucault in Anthropology. They didn't teach him there. I knew about his work because my network ran through English and Comparative Literature. When I got to Yale in 1986, anthropology was embroiled in two controversies, the structuralists and culturalists against the Marxists, and the scientists against the writers. Some faculty in the Yale department were trying to combine culture and political economy, others were excellent linguistic anthropologists. I see I have wandered from your question, but I hope this helps make sense of my relation to the discipline.

Yes, I think it's very good, this in-depth description that you gave us, all these different links between these areas. But we also read an article that analyzes your work, and there they presented your concept of 'embagination'.

Yes, *embagination*. That was a quasi-concept I proposed in my first *e-flux* essay.¹⁷

And because of that we could understand your more multifaceted view. And that was why we got curious about 'lived experience'.

Well, definitely lived experience, located experience, immanent experience. But always also understanding that locations are eddies where various forces are meeting and contesting to determine what form will emerge. Thus the discipline of anthropology is a force that can be used against itself. I can use it as an alibi. I can say, hey, the discipline claims to situate knowledge in the obligations of lived experience. So that's what I am doing. That is my work, to continue to foster this obligation to my Belyuen/Karrabing relations as a way of producing knowledge about settler liberalism. Which can make for awkward encounters, such as when someone asks me what research project I am working on at the moment. My answer is usually some longwinded account of how what we are doing together at the moment makes me, and us, think about settler liberal governance differently. I have no research agenda other than what we are doing together. But we're getting off topic. I should stick to answering your questions.

You already started to share with us some areas of Foucault's work that were problematic for you. Did you try to overcome these problems or did they inspire you to go in some other directions, or both? You said that they were tools for you in that moment, but how did you use them or dismiss them when you saw their limits?

¹⁷ Elisabeth Povinelli, "Routes/World," *E-flux* 27 (2011), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/27/67991/routes-worlds/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

In my first book, *Labor's Lot*, I would have to look, but I don't think I cite Foucault.¹⁸ I might have, I can't remember. [I have now looked, and I do cite him.¹⁹] In any case, *Labor's Lot* - and then more specifically in *The Cunning of Recognition*²⁰ - I examine how the law of liberal cultural recognition inserted a particular imaginary of kinship, alliance, and descent into the mechanism of land claims. This is a point that Yellowknives Dene Glen Coulthard would also later brilliantly elaborate in the settler Canadian context.²¹ In other words, I encountered a Foucault who was arguing that "we" don't do alliance, we do scientific sexuality. The two figures of the sovereign and the regicide have given way to the four figures of sexuality—the Malthusian couple, the perverse adult, the masturbating child and the hysterical woman—that posed the problematics of biopower. But the problematic that my Indigenous colleagues faced were different. To paraphrase Foucault, what was the governance of self and others from within a settler framework of cultural recognition? Is it simply another iteration of biopolitics? How could this be when one aspect of this mode of governance is an insistence that Indigenous people become a funhouse reflection of the settler imaginary of its own past? So, Foucault was an inspiration in the sense that his understanding of biopower allowed me to see how the spectral governance of kinship, descent and alliance was projected on others as a demand. "You must appear to us through the spectral readings of our own history."

I think you have also approached some of the other questions we posed in this talk about the way anthropology came into your life, the way Foucault came into your life, and your priorities. The important thing here is the rootedness still in the lived experience of these people in previous generations. So maybe we should continue. What do you think are the connections and differences between an approach and an ethical commitment to the otherwise (in the sense you discuss in "The will to be otherwise"),²² through archeology and genealogy (discourses, practices and archives) and an anthropological one, if that's a difference that makes sense to you?

About the ethical commitment to the otherwise... Yes, Foucault sits in the background to my thinking about the ethical commitment, as do the Stoics from my St. John's days, but also the American pragmatist William James. I try to think with obligation more than with commitment, though. When I say commitment, I hear the occluded first person as subject of the action. "I choose to commit." "I have chosen to commit". I have long ago come to accept or admit – admit is the right word, I think, or I came to understand, after struggling with this idea of choosing one's adventure, that the only true choices are ones made around what one finds one has to do; *I cannot but feel I should, must, ought*. So, why do I continue to be committed? I think the most obvious answer is that I have not been willing

¹⁸ Elisabeth Povinelli, *Labor's Lot: The Power, History, and Culture of Aboriginal Action* (1994).

¹⁹ In the Introduction, I note that "while drawing from Foucault's insight that particular forms of knowledge are an aspect of Western power and dominations, this study also attempts to demonstrate the power of Fourth World knowledge to resist domination", Povinelli, *Labor's Lot*, 13.

²⁰ Povinelli, *Cunning of Recognition*.

²¹ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014).

²² Povinelli, "The Will to Be Otherwise/ The Effort of Endurance,".

or able, or desired, to direct the effort it would take to redirect my dispositif. I could read this as a Foucauldian point of view, the way he tethered ethics to askesis, and askesis to dispositive/habitus/power. The sheer fact of encountering how you are obligated is not ethics. Nor is it merely a reflection of that fact. Rather, ethics is a direction of effort to maintain and deepen this obligation or redirect it. It is not to recognize who you truly are in a given dominant discourse but to direct energy into that which is in actuality or immanently otherwise to this discourse.

Because settler colonialism is a force of relationality—I am thinking here of Edouard Glissant's work—the otherwise will have multiple actual and possible forms depending on where you sit in relation to it. I was very taken by Luce Irigaray's²³ approach, for instance, to the question of the other woman. If the woman is just the other man, then we must pull into being the other of that other. And yet, I kept thinking about the difference between a western subject pulling into being the otherwise within being and an Indigenous subject's, my Belyuen/Karrabing colleagues', effort to keep a way of being obligatory, palpable, ethically and socially relevant. This struggle to endure is creative, mobile, strategic because it is in a constant relation to ongoing settler maneuvers. It is philosophy as practice, as askesis, as Pierre Hadot would say — the classics philosopher who was influential to Foucault's rethinking of pleasure. Philosophy not as a discipline but as a way of life. Anthropology not as a discipline but as a way of life. But we should never think that what western subjects must do to create another way of life—an otherwise—is the same as what Indigenous subjects must do to keep their way of life. The strategies, analytics, and tactics are different because of, again I am thinking of Glissant here, the sedimentational history of colonialism.

These issues are also central to our Karrabing practice.

You are also bringing other thinkers and putting them in relation to Foucault, and we think that is also what we wanted to do in the Special Issue because sometimes scholarship can have troubles to think beyond Foucault.

Yes. You know, the first time I experienced the real stakes of the finite was when I read the last available writing of William Faulkner. I read a lot when I was a little puppy. I chewed through a whole field of authors. I had a high school teacher who would give me a list and bang: I was off. I remember the effects of realizing there was no more Flannery O'Connor I could read, there was no more Faulkner. I grew up in the South, so I was reading all these crazy white people. I have thoughts about them now, but then it was the sheer fact that they were dead, and so they could not produce anything else unless there's *that* little piece of paper in an archive somewhere... I would feel like this with other authors, certainly James Baldwin. But this is my entry to finitude. So, I get when people are hanging on the word, and then there's no more words to come. That being said... of all people, Foucault? He's the one that gets me to remember that, hello, there is no author. I mean, he was really great with that. All these *guys*, these guys in the big French guy

²³ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1974] (1985).

tradition, he was one of the ones who said *there's no author; there's no text* – also Bakhtin. Texts are the echoes of echoes of people remembered, forgotten, intentionally excluded.

Listening to what you said, Elizabeth, regarding this commitment to be otherwise, I was thinking about this whole project of decoloniality studies. So, when we think of going beyond Foucault, expanding the horizon for Foucault Studies – I think, in my location of being in the global South, so to speak, I read Foucault from my situated life experience, which is what postcolonial thinkers have been talking about, this argument of a commitment to be otherwise. So, do you find an alignment with postcolonial thinkers? And, talking about going beyond Foucault, I think Dipesh Chakrabarty has been talking about this concept of climate and capital, bringing them together. And also Donna Haraway... you talk about indigenous thinkers, but I find it really productive to bring thinkers like Haraway, who also made the slogan of "make kins, not babies"²⁴ and ideas like that; I think this is amazingly radical, and I really find it very productive to think the simultaneity of all these things; Foucault, Haraway and your work on geontologies.²⁵ How would you look at it? Because this whole idea of looking into the problem of the governance of life or the neoliberal forces and otherwise, it comes to this idea of alternative imagination, looking in different corners of the world - and that is the whole idea of being decolonial. So, do you think that it is time for decolonial and Foucauldian studies, and decolonial critical thinking?

Yes. I hope that my work has helped to do just that – to decolonize critical thinking. I took this task as part of what the older Belyuen men and women were asking me to do when they asked me to help understand the perversions of settler cultural recognition. I can't control how people read my work, but it is intended as a relentless critique of the limits of western critical thought, including authors I hold dear—Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Peirce, James—because of how they embody very specific epistemological sedimentations of colonialism even as they may help us see those sediments. I would say my first three books, *Labor's Lot*, *The Cunning of Recognition*, and *The Empire of Love*, mapped a cartography of the settler politics of recognition—and, of course, my recent *The Inheritance*. Then, starting with *Economies of Abandonment* and continuing through *Between Gaia and Ground*, I foreground more explicitly the limits of western critical thought when viewed from the other side of the colonial relation. I am currently working on a book that examines semiotics in the wake of geontopower.

Perhaps because of my background in philosophy, I have been particularly concerned with how a certain desire for an ontological grounding, independent of the colonial sedimentations that constitute the ground we walk on, eat from, share with the more-than-human, give lie to the distinction between life and nonlife et cetera, continually creeps back into critical work. We cannot begin from nowhere/notime—which is what beginning with universal claims do—to get where we need to go. I love Dipesh's work on the climate

²⁴ Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6:1 (2015).

²⁵ *Geontologies*.

of history.²⁶ Although he doesn't explicitly say so, his argument that climate collapse is happening to all of us but not in the same way sits alongside his argument that "we" are experiencing a crisis of epochal consciousness in such a way that we must add "but we are not experiencing this crisis in the same way". In *Between Gaia and Ground*, I suggest that between the colonized and colonizing worlds of climate change is the relation between those who experience it as part of the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism and those who experience it as a coming catastrophe. I hear Haraway in a similar way. I don't hear her making a universal statement when she says that we all need to make kin not babies, because many peoples have long made kin with what in the west is thought of as the more-than-human world; kin who refuse the geontological division of life and nonlife.

Just trying to connect with your answer to Anindya, I have a note from Economies of Abandonment²⁷ where you say that, for you, the biopolitical is not a space but a spacing. So, maybe just to get back to your reading of Foucault, could you tell us a bit about that and then we can move to the questions about Covid?

So, *Economies of Abandonment* was trying to say, "I love you guys, but I am fed up. I've been fed up for a long time". You know? You can love someone and just say "Stop it, just look at how the location of your thought affects not only your thought, but your desire, and the deforming force of your desire on others." So, on the one hand is the space from which one's thought emerges. On the other hand is the determination of another space so that it can give you what you desire. In terms of this second space, *Economies* was particularly interested in the critical desire for radical forms of *homo sacer*, say, the muselmann. These forms of radical abandonment were figured as the space in which a political otherwise can emerge. And yet there was little critical interest in the, what shall I say?, the reality of these spaces. At least William James had sense enough to not affirm two things at that same time—that the location that can give us the concepts we need are the very spaces that power has so dominated that the effort of endurance—the need to become an obdurate thing—is the first condition. Hope gives way to stubbornness. A space opens for different affects as well as tactics of the otherwise. This space is, of course, related to the space in which the biopolitical emerged, namely, a colonial space in which biopolitics can be seen as a disavowed relationship to ongoing colonialism. Achille Mbembe's essay "Necropolitics"²⁸ was, of course, crucial to our understanding of this disavowed history. But I think the necropolitical is embedded in geontological governance.

And this is the second kind of *spacing* that interests me—the *bionto* and the *geonto*, a spacing with a long genealogy in Western philosophy but is weaponized during the colonial period to differentiate between dynamic and inert people and things and thereby legitimate the violence of colonial extraction and settlement. So, obviously, when I read Foucault's thinking about the separation of two modes of governance—sovereign power

²⁶ Dipesh Chakarabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Enquiry* 35:2 (2009).

²⁷ Elisabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (2011b).

²⁸ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15:1 (2003).

and biopower—I saw these as operating on one side of geontopower, as geontopower, the terror of the inert, as animating the governance of life and death in sovereign power and biopower. Geontopower makes it appear as if some forms of existing are merely affected by external forces, all the while making them inert both in a discursive and praxis sense. So that’s the second kind of spacing. It is a rather long conversation, maybe we could now turn to the questions about the pandemic.

Yes! So, what are your views on the COVID 19 pandemic? Do you think of it from a specific perspective – from a specific ontological or epistemological position?

I approached the pandemic as I approach any socioecology: what is “the pandemic” from where I’m sitting, what does it look like, what is it doing, to whom, and under what conditions of governance? And, how is the governance of this event? What’s the source or the conditions of its emergence? Where does it look like an event? Where like an “ongoingness”? Is it signaling a new form of governance or a new angle on how we understand the forms of governance we are within? Will it change the orientation of a coming governance—for whom, what, et cetera? More concretely, given our above discussion, how did the pandemic ripple through the geographies of biopolitics and alliance, the lively and the inert?

We think it would be great if you could briefly present us the three figures of geontopower – the Virus, the Animist and the Desert. Do you think those figures can help our understanding of the COVID 19 pandemic and the reactions to it?

Okay, in *Geontologies* I propose three figures, tactics and strategies that can characterize the western imaginary as geontopower’s grip on legal regimes, disciplines, and markets shake – the Virus, the Animist, the Desert. Let me clarify what I mean when I say, “the wake of geontopower.” First, I am not arguing that biopower came first, then came geontopower, and, now, as geontopower has revealed itself to be a form of governance rather than a description of nature, a new form of power, say viral power, is emerging. We can trace the roots of the separation of bios and geos, the biontological and geontological, back to the Greek if we wanted. But this division and its political functions have had dispersed deployments and effects. I am interested in how it was weaponized, as I said above, during the initial colonial invasions, the European invasions, of the world. I am interested in how this division was rotated into a hierarchy of human societies, those most “lively” (so Europeans claim that they were a progressive, dynamic civilization) and those grossly “inert” (for instance, settler descriptions of Indigenous people in Australia as stone age people). I want to understand how this division was used to justify the extraction of labor, life, lands, kin and more than human kin. How the West could feel that ripping apart worlds was “progress.” It was certainly sovereign power claiming the right to determine who could be slaughtered, but this sovereign power became entangled within the justificatory frameworks of geontopower fairly immediately, say, in the Valladolid debates. As

nationalism began to ground the governance of self in biopower, geontopower dug deeper into the governance of others.

Second, as the crisis of climate collapse grows ever more present to the affluent west, the governance of existence through the separation of Life and Nonlife is not working for those it was designed to work. If, as I am arguing, geontopower is primarily a discursive infrastructure to the general economies of extraction and distribution, if it functions to extract and process materials seen as valuable to liberal capitalism, taking the purified material into their bodies and cites and leaving, or sequestering, the toxic tailings in colonies and racialized spaces, then this system is not working anymore. The geontological toilet is overflowing into lands made pure by turning others into wastelands.

So, when I say “in the wake of geontopower”, I am trying to conjure this waste system and what it was designed to do. If we remember these two points, then I think we remember to be very wary of fixes to climate change or to the multiple crises coming; the figure of the virus, and the way Covid was approached, being two of these. And so, my suggested figures of geontopower’s wake are not exits but symptoms of western discourse as it tries to reground its legitimacy. I’m paraphrasing Foucault: his four figures and strategies of sexuality weren’t exits from biopower: they were the figures and strategies through which western *savoirs* were working out their anxieties, working out the internal logics of their own power.

While I am very cautious around embracing these figures, I know that they can be radically invaded—here I am thinking of the artistic practice of Sarah Rosalena, whose 2018 exhibition titled *the desert, the animist and the virus* portrayed characters located in the depth of the desert who refuse the invasion logics of settler imaginaries of Life and Nonlife.

I think our Karrabing Film Collective²⁹ made a similar intervention in our 2018 film, *Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland*.³⁰ *Mermaids* is set in a near future toxic world. White people can no longer venture outside without beginning to decompose. But Indigenous people can and do. So, we asked ourselves, what would white people do under these circumstances? The answer – they would take Indigenous children and experiment on them as they tried to extract whatever elements within Indigenous sacred sites were protecting the people who belonged to them.

When Covid hit, people asked me, how did you know the virus was coming? And they asked similar questions about *Mermaids*. How did Karrabing know something like Covid was coming? The answer is that the formation of geontopower is readily apparent in

²⁹ The Karrabing Film Collective was created in 2007, and it is an intergenerational group, based in the Northern Territory in Australia, that has been using film-making and other media to call attention to and interrogate the experience of Aboriginal peoples. In our conversation, Povinelli refers to the collective as “a group of people who started making films, films that are for the lending of energy to try to keep this other way of being in relation to land and the more than human world going”. The movie mentioned by her, “presents a picture of the possible futures that will result from industrial toxicity”. Ida Pisani, Prometeo Gallery, <http://www.prometeogallery.com/en/artist/elizabeth-povinelli-karrabing-film-collective> (accessed June 25, 2023). [Note from the interviewers].

³⁰ For more information about their work, see Karrabing indigenous corporation, Karrabing, www.karrabing.info, (accessed July 30, 2023). [N.I.].

Indigenous worlds. The virus, territorial transformations leading to an unheralded deathscape, is not a coming catastrophe there. It is the ongoing ancestral catastrophe. There one knows that the politics of the virus depends on how you are situated in relation to its governance.

This goes back to points I tried to make in *Empire of Love* and *Economies of Abandonment*. If you are designated the Virus, or self-designate, you will experience the entire infrastructure of power reorienting to exterminating you. You might be “pure potentiality” but, as Foucault also noted in *The Governance of Self and Others* (2010), your ability to survive let alone endure long enough to spread and determine existence would be miraculous. The Otherwise is the virus but the politics of endurance is always only proximate to the virus. As I noted in *Economies of Abandonment*, the politics of late liberal governance and counter-tactics are always vacillating between camouflage and espionage, and always erupting in foundational moments of decision. Do I want to alter myself slighted to (co)exist? Am I willing to let a new viral form transform existence even when I will cease to exist? Can I get out of the framework of friend and enemy, the logics of colonial bellicose, even as I exit the liberal lie that everything can just coexist within each other. Remember how we were told that we were in a war with Covid. The metaphors of this war got very floral, certainly out of the mouth of the governor of New York, which is where I was for half of the pandemic. Some say we won the war. Some say we have learned how to coexist with the Covid virus. I think that’s true if we forget that to coexist we have to remain blind to those who cannot and if we ignore the ways that the virus has hastened a massive disruption of the global system—its markets, its modes of coexistence and conviviality, et cetera.

So, we understood that you see it as very processual. But also, we think you said, Elizabeth, that you experience that one could have one’s own relationship to the virus and not subjectify it.

On the one hand, I guess for me the *figure* of the Virus could be helpful to try to understand this particular virus. How does Covid show that viral power is and is not an exit from geontopower? On the other hand, it’s helpful for me to use the actual virus as a space for thinking about an ethics of extinguishment as different from a discourse of war. How might the actual virus allow us to develop an ethics of extinguishment outside of the discourse of friend and enemy that has dominated political theory and medical imaginaries. I cannot but help think here with Spinoza as much as my Indigenous colleagues—if everything has the same right to exist, seeks to continue to exist and “understands” its existence within the milieu it helped create and depends on, how can I ethically extinguish it, and/or, what relation should I have to it when I do so? I think Zoe Todd, a Métis critical theorist and artist, raises these exact questions in “Fish, Kin, and Hope”.³¹ There she confronts how to reawaken a caring relation with Métis, say oil sands, that have been weaponized as petroleum byproducts killing other relations in her ancestral creeks and rivers. How to approach relationality outside discourses of enemy and war?

³¹ Zoe Todd, “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43 (2017).

This becomes even harder when we don't feel or see any relation to folks like Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, Macron, Meloni; to transphobic, misogynist and homophobic evangelicals, to white supremacists. How do I look at them and say, *you know, I'm going to work to make you not exist, to make the conditions of existence such that you're not a possibility in it* without turning them into an enemy, a freak, a virus, a terrorist, any of the terms we use to deny that within their milieu you are the same—and more—that this discourse, these affects, are *from their milieu*? I don't want these affects. Without them I may seem a cold blooded killer. But this is because ethical affects of extinguishment outside a discourse of war are being defined by *a discourse of war*.

In some ways, I am recalling the debate between Habermas and Foucault. Do we need a normative horizon even if this horizon is internally dependent and dynamically related to public reason? Perhaps. But I have been thinking through a conceptualization of "obligation" which would refuse the division of public and moral reason³² and would understand that the right to exist and the need to extinguish can never be separated. Why have I tried to think/practice this form of ethics? Because it slows me down. Because it opens me to thinking I might need to give way to others if they are to have a way. Who do I want to have a way?

It's a very important answer this one, very interesting. And we have invited you to this interview to learn, in-depth, about your way of thinking. So, we will just ask something more related to what you are saying here. You recognize that a friend-enemy discourse is the dominant political framework, and then you bring Foucault, Spinoza, and others to think, "ok, what are the possibilities?" And that is even another way of thinking. But when one brings it into the dominant friend-enemy discourse, it is difficult not to be trapped there. And you also ask the question, "is it possible then to take this ground and go from here?" – which is quite impressive – that you have thought through this to find a positive way of rooting yourself in 'friend-enemy' even if that would relate to that particular discourse. I would totally just avoid it. I wouldn't go there because I would see myself as being drawn into a way of thinking that I don't want to affirm.

Well, yes, nobody wants to go there, right? But the question is, then, how do you make decisions about getting rid of something? When you're going to get rid of something, you can simply not think about what you're doing – you can just not worry about the ethics of it or the conditions of your action. But if we really want to go back to the theme of this special issue, how to practice Foucault now, that is the question. Perhaps because my white family was and my Karrabing family are hunters...maybe I am in what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro called a predator/prey mentality rather than a friend/enemy mentality. I know that nothing wants to be eaten; everything resists being disturbed from its milieu – fish, rock, tides, animals. And yet we must eat, dwell, et cetera and in doing disturb. So how do you go about killing something, extinguishing something, pulling it up, eating it, uprooting, changing the composition ethically?

I try to take the worse-case scenario for me, Bolsonaro, Meloni, Trump et cetera...

³² *The Cunning of Recognition*.

Yes, it is, of course, very good to hear your perspective. But, you know, one can also teach them to think of getting rid of themselves. But good luck, of course, in practice... What do you think will be the legacy of the pandemic in terms of, you know, actualities and governance? As an exercise of imagination...

I love that—teach them to get rid of themselves...but, again, just to press the point, they exist as and in relation to the milieu of war, but that doesn't mean I have to, nor does it mean I am a pacifist. On whether we'll see a wild transformation of the governance of self/other, markets, ecologies, I am of two minds. On the one hand, I think we are already seeing this. So, I myself do not think we are still within Late Liberalism. The pandemic heightened the disturbance of global supply chains, the basis of a neoliberal markets. These supply chains were under attack by the likes of Trump before the pandemic, but the pandemic globalized the problem and made it a problem to solve—thus the rhetoric of derisking supply chains. Likewise, the pandemic has seen many people, who have the economic wherewithal to do so, reflect on what shape they want their work to take in relation to what kind of life they want to be living. And, for a moment, we have been witnessing the power of labor to determine wages. We are also seeing, however, the banks raising interest rates to increase unemployment as part of their inflation fight—trying to stifle the power of labor to increase wages. We are seeing bosses trying to push people back to work. We are seeing the flight from cities and a consequent diminution of the sharing economies that emerged in them during the pandemic. And we hear of pandemic fatigue.

Fatigue. For a moment, those who had never experienced the soul-wrecking fatigue of death and possible death did. They didn't like it. No one does. But I do think this rage around pandemic fatigue—the *jouissance* of consumerism that many engaged in as a remedy—just emphasizes for me that some people have lived their lives and continue to think that their lives should be lived outside the economies of fatigue. The economy of fatigue that is created when every day I worry if I am going to survive. Are my children going to be alive tomorrow, my parents and grandparents? If my grandparents lived long enough for me to know them, if my parents did? This is an economy of fatigue that Karrabing, and many other black brown and Indigenous people know intimately. It is hard to get people to understand this kind of fatigue as a way of life in ongoing racist settler governance. So, while I think there are structural and affective disturbances, I also see various personal, state and market maneuvers that are trying to reentrench the distribution of fatigue that is part and parcel of the long arm of colonialism.

Do you think that the lived experience with and after the COVID 19 pandemic has introduced new aesthetics with consequence to the Virus as a figure of geontopower?

You know, it's super interesting... I am a visitor in spaces of critical artistic practice. I find them really interesting, strange, inspiring. They are very heterotopic, including people

who make things, objects of art, hoping that the art object will inspire a different way of being together. Others are more focused on askesis—focused on producing events that help train people to be progressively together. In this critical space, askesis and aesthetics have gotten into interesting complexly blurred relationships. Askesis as the arts of self and other; aesthetics as artworks oriented towards a progressive politics.

Prior to Covid, Animism was an important topic in these spaces, both those producing objects and those producing events (happenings)—and, also, just to make everything more complicated than it has to be, right before Covid we saw certain progressive art institutions increasingly interested in art collectives rather than individual artists. But, after the last *Documenta*, we are also in the midst of a backlash against not collectives per se but a way of practicing art based from those outside the north; those who see the intersection of askesis and aesthetics as first and foremost as political and ecological exercises meant to interrupt and reverse the organization of geontopower. The nonwestern focused collective as a decolonizing machine is really super interesting. Some are under assault, but this assault is intensifying the spaces of geontopower we were just discussing.

I think these works seem new and shocking to some. But, again, as we've been saying, from the perspective of the ancestral catastrophe of colonialism, they are the perfect weave and warp.

I completely agree. I mean, I have some questions on your idea of Geontologies. I find it interesting in terms of connecting it with the Indian eco-feminist thinker Vandana Shiva's idea of art-democracy. I find it really interesting how it relates to your distinction between the animate and the inanimate, the rock, the planetary... Listening to you and reading your work, I think that we can expand Foucault's idea of biopolitics in the realm of the planetary because it very much involves the question of the planet, and, if not, a colonization of the social and the bio is very much the colonization of the life or the entire planetary in question.

Perhaps it not only planetary, because at heart the geontological framework of biopower is a kind of *monetary* practice that doesn't allow itself to be bound to our planet. And all of these, planetary, monetary and solar practices stubbornly continue to reentrench themselves in the grounds of colonialism. Literally. Thus we hear about having to accept that there will be zones of abandonment; places that will need to become unlivable to save life. And yet, where are these zones? In places that colonialism have already wrecked. Likewise, where will we locate the massive earth wrecking lithium and cobalt mines? Primarily in colonized spaces.

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