

A conversation with Elizabeth Povinelli

Sand Stories

DE Vor und während der Ausstellung widmet sich die Diskurs Reihe *Sand Stories* aktuellen Theorien über die Klimakrise und Klimagerechtigkeit. Was kann aus und mit der Wüste heraus imaginiert werden?

Kuratiert von Sofie Luckhardt und Sarah Johanna Theurer

EN Preceding and accompanying the exhibition the conversation format *Sand Stories* explores current theories around the climate crisis and climate justice.

What can be imagined out of and with the desert?

Curated by Sofie Luckhardt and Sarah Johanna Theurer



Kalziumkarbonat / calcium carbonate. Foto / image: Sofie Luckhardt

"What are the stories we need to be telling now since these old ones are clearly the foundation of this catastrophe, whether ancestral or coming... What world are we trying to not just imagine but pull into being so that these stories are sedimenting into practices?"

QUESTION [SARAH JOHANNA THEURER & SOFIE LUCKHARDT] The desert is often described as the horror of the in-order. Elizabeth, you have described the desert as "life's nemesis." So I was wondering if you could take this as a starting point to unpack this image of the desert a bit, maybe also lining out the ideas of geontopower?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI In Geontologies, I claim that the desert is one of three figures and three symptoms emerging in the wake of geontopower. So, the first thing to remember is that when I am discussing the desert, I am not discussing actual deserts—real deserts—but rather how the desert is deployed as a symptom and a figure of the collapse of a form of governance. The desert is accompanied by two other figures: the animist and the virus. So I say there are three figures that we have to understand as symptoms of a discourse of power, geontopower, that isn't working anymore to secure Western power.

QUESTION What is geontopower?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI Geontopower is a mode of power through which existence is governed by dividing existence into Life and Nonlife. Geontopower acts as if it's describing existence. Importantly, geontopower does not operate through the division and distinctions of life and death. We are not talking about biopower and its genealogical relation to sovereign power, both of which, though differently, govern through life's relation to death. From a geontological point of view, death sits on the side of life, death is imminent to life. The basic elements of geontopower have very old roots in philosophical discourse—you can stretch the distinction between back to Aristotle. During the colonization of the globe through Europe, these roots were transformed and weaponized.

QUESTION So what opposes life is not death, but rather the inert. Which we encounter in the desert?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI In a geontological imaginary, the inert is that which comes into or is in existence, without the capacity to be born, to reproduce, and to die—processes claimed to be indwelling to life. Within geontology, the rock for instance is said to be different from life insofar as the rock does not have a power to unfold into an indwelling potentiality. It can crumble away. It can be transformed into something else. That is, it can be acted upon. But because it itself is merely the scene of other agencies, and agency and potentiality have been built out of the rights of life as imagined from the limits of death/finitude no ethics or politics can be seated in non-life. There's this carbon imaginary that distinguishes the two. So in this geontological imaginary, life is where the preciousness of existence was. And it is fundamentally different from non-life.

QUESTION Why was it so important to the governance of the colonial era?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI Because the colonial period weaponized a previous philosophical distinction—namely the Aristotelian distinction between a division within the domain of dynamic potentiality: that between the actual/actual-ity (energia) and actualization (entelecheia); or between that which comes into existence with indwelling dynamic potential and that which is in existence without such a power. Colonial

discourses and debates projected this distinction between forms of existence onto forms of human civilizational existence. The hierarchy of being was laminated on a new hierarchy of colonial rank.

Explorers and Missionaries, amongst them great philosophers, mobilized the stone to characterize a people—stone age people—to justify all the dimensions of the extraction machinery of colonial expansion: extraction of land, of life, of labor, of thought. Colonial extraction rearranged the ethics of killing even as it reorganized matter itself, moving everything of worth into European lives and leaving behind its toxic tailings.

Seeing how geontopower emerged during the colonial period helps us understand that it is not a new power emerging in the wake of climate collapse—is not a power emerging after biopower. Rather, geontopower provides the scaffolding of our biopolitical sense and focus. But if you're Indigenous, you can see very clearly how geontopower is deployed within biopower. Why? Because the invasions of Indigenous lands, definitely the invasion of lands now called Australia, were premised on the people there being rock-like, "Stone Age people." And in being characterized as a stone, settlers could destroy and exterminate without killing let alone murdering. After all you can destroy a stone but you cannot murder it within a geontological imaginary. Geontological governance—its extension into law—doesn't recognize the ethical or legal standing of rocks. And, if it does under new laws which personify nature, geontological governance demands that rocks and other forms of more-than-human existence conform to their logics. Life. I discuss the stakes of this transformation of all existence into Life in *Between Gaia and Ground*. Indigenous people have been arguing for years that this division between Life and Non-life is not their division; that it's a dangerous division. It justifies the ongoing movements of the massive capitalist extraction machine.

QUESTION But with climate collapse and environmental toxicities, this division isn't working anymore?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI This division of Life and Non-life was mobilized to direct resources; Europeans go somewhere, extract the values that they wanted and suck them into their world, leaving the toxic tailings behind. European lives, lands, and discourses of superiority swelled up like a tick. But suddenly, the division of existence that allowed this swelling started shaking—many people peg this to the awareness within the West of coming climate collapse which in the early days went under the name of Anthropogenic climate change. Under the pressure of climate change the West began to see that the geontological division was not merely false, but dangerous. Of course, it had always been false. It had always been dangerous. But those who benefitted from this division could no longer sequester the danger into other people's bodies and lands, so suddenly the geontological imaginary was false and dangerous for the West.

QUESTION Back to the desert.

ELIZABETH POVINELLI The desert is a figure and a symptom of the shaking of geonto power. It stands for the idea that there is a distinction between life and non-life, and we have to hold on to this distinction because life is precious, non-life is everywhere, is the entire grey, black universe. Geontology's spectral desert is a vast emptiness—it is the threat of absolute nothingness for even the sands cannot hold their shape.

QUESTION When is the moment of crisis or of catastrophe? We've been reading WEB du Bois posing this same question: what is a catastrophe?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI

In *Between Gaia and Ground* I make a distinction between two ways climate collapse is figured, on the one hand as a coming catastrophe and on the other as an ancestral catastrophe. The coming catastrophe is a horizontal storm, dark and foreboding, embodying the racial connotations of what is heading toward the shore. This figuration of climate collapse emerges especially clearly among those who have long benefitted from the extractive machinery of geontopower. The coming catastrophe is especially destabilizing for a western liberal imaginary, because the horizon is where liberals always parked truth and justice. It was where they were going, unfolding, potentializing. It was what allowed them to disavow all the harms they created on their way to progress. In other words, the horizon has functioned as both alibi and justificatory space. And now, well, it's hurdling toward them in a "black" fury.

QUESTION

The coming catastrophe and the ancestral catastrophe are temporally different. You describe it like this: "We hear all around us the coming event, the catastrophic, imaginary orienting and demanding action. The toxicity [...] creeping desert, the last wave, the sixth extinction, and yet pulsing through various terrains is a very different temporality. The river becomes a polluted damp, the fog becomes smog, rock formations become computer components." - This is the world right now, no?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI

Let's say if you're living in Native American communities, or if you're living in Europe on the edge of industrial ruins, or slag heaps in Congo... the horizon is not out there coming towards you—the horizon is bubbling up under your feet. The horizon is sedimentation. It's not in the future. It's not temporary.

So, yes, these two ways of figuring catastrophe are not simple temporal inversions. They are composed of different event structures, quasi events, that are the segmentations of the distributed toxicity. This catastrophe is not coming from the future. It's the materializations of the past as present sedimentary distributions.

QUESTION

You went into anthropology after your first stay in the northern territories in Australia, and this field of study is, I suppose, deeply connected with ethnology and has ties to colonialism and imperialism. You're an anthropologist but you're not studying people but forms of governance?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI

Yes, I study late liberalism, in all of its tactical adjustments in order to participate in a counter-practice with my Karrabing colleagues. Karrabing is itself a counter practice. As we practice our obligations to the worlds of the ancestors, settler power manifests its tactics, and we mobilize a counter world.

Anthropology remains in many places a liberal discipline, focused on studying other ways of life in order to translate them for others. Translation is seen as broadening understanding. With Karrabing, we try not to be a translation machine. Our films show and can be understood by people who understand what they are seeing, but they don't aim to be translation machines.

QUESTION

You spoke of the anthropology of the other. Can you explain what or where that is?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI

For me there is an important difference between the other and the otherwise. Take for example, Luce Irigaray's feminist search for a space of the other of the other. Irigaray's point was that, if woman is man's other, then a feminist politics would be one in which "women" would be other to this other—be otherwise to the system of the same and the other (of the same). Likewise, the settler and the Indigenous

are produced out of the colonial discourse of the governance of the prior—"the Indigenous" is what was prior to the settler, i.e., the Indigenous is defined by the event structure of colonization. Many critical Indigenous scholars such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Zoe Todd, Glen Coulthard, Kim Tallbear, Audra Simpson, and many others, have been working to keep in place an other (otherwise) to this colonial imaginary.

QUESTION It seems like the work of the Karrabing collective as a counter practice is constantly withdrawing, balancing but never falling into this either-or-logic. Now when we try to project into potential futures, we feel that we can only do that from where we're at right now, where we are entangled. How not to reproduce the same old narratives?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI Yes, with the caveat that Karrabing members always remind people not to romanticize the space of the otherwise. We're talking about the inhabitation of the generational sedimentations of racism and settler colonialism. If you idealize Karrabing, it puts them and others in the liberal discourse of self-uplift. If they could do it, why didn't you do it?

Rex Edmunds, an Emmiyengal Karrabing, often stresses that the use of film and art to create a counter force to colonial logics works for Karrabing. But everyone needs to try to find the practice that joins people together. And it might not be filming. Linda Yarrowin, also an Emmiyengal Karrabing, put it like this, the nature of "your own" (how you belong to each other) lies in how you're connected to others—to be one's own is seated in connectivity.

QUESTION It matters what matter we think matters with?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI It's not just what matter you are thinking with, as in, are you thinking with sand or clouds? Are you're thinking with people or with a couch? It's not the matter per se, but the histories that have shaped my connection to this field of matter. The question is how am I in relation to this matter as opposed to you? You cannot just select various matter and think through them. Perhaps better to think, how am I related to them vis-à-vis the distributions of the ancestral catastrophe?

QUESTION We are trying to generate stories. What can stories do?

ELIZABETH POVINELLI Different story genres do different work. In my own writing practice, I move around different forms of story-telling, some theoretical, some quasi historical, some fictional. Each form moves across disciplined space, hopefully in some directed disruptive way. In Karrabing, we also move around genres, historical, drama, comedy, scifi, horror. The purpose of the story-telling is oriented to disrupting racial settler narratives and reinforcing Karrabing modes of belonging to each other and the more-than-human ancestral lands. Thus a scaffold of kinship, relationality and belonging subtends all the genres in which Karrabing express themselves. And this scaffolding is ultimately tethered to truth of the ancestral landscapes and the particular forms of kinship and affiliations they gave rise to. So no matter if the films and installations are fiction at the surface, as Angelina Lewis, an Emmiyengal Karrabing says, they are constantly making reference to and reinforcing the Karrabing ancestral present.

Elizabeth Povinelli is a critical theorist and filmmaker. Her critical writing has focused on developing a critical theory of late settler liberalism that would support an anthropology of the otherwise. This potential theory has unfolded across five books, numerous essays, and a thirty-five years of collaboration with her Indigenous colleagues in north Australia including, most recently, six films they have created as members of the Karrabing Film Collective. She is a Professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University, and a Corresponding Fellow at the Australian Academy of Humanities. Her research has involved developing a biopolitics that includes the geontological, meaning a rarely discussed principle that makes current biopolitics what they are: the distinction of life and non-life. bios vs. geos.