

On semiotic mediation: the bodily conditions of human and more-than-human communication

An interview with Elizabeth Povinelli¹

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Abstract: During the 2022 Spring semester at Columbia University, Joana Plaza Pinto attended two graduate courses of the Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology & Gender Studies Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Semiotics 2* and *Feminist Theory*. Under the influence of these courses, this interview is one of the multiple conversations related to the relationship between gender, intimacy, and language. On semiotic mediation, Povinelli spoke about her connection with Linguistic Anthropology, Psychoanalysis and Peircean Semiotics, the bodily conditions of human and more-than-human communication, the subjectivation forces of the metapragmatics of languages, the semiotic conditions of the subject and the land, and the connections of these issues with racist colonialist forms in Liberalism.

Keywords: Semiotics; Subjectivity; Metapragmatics; Liberalism.

¹ This interview took place in New York City (USA), February 25, 2022.

Resumo: Durante o primeiro semestre de 2022 na Columbia University, Joana Plaza Pinto frequentou dois cursos de pós-graduação de Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Professora da cadeira Franz Boas de Antropologia e de Estudos de Gênero, *Semiótica 2* e *Teoria Feminista*. Sob a influência desses cursos, esta entrevista é uma de suas múltiplas conversas em torno da relação entre gênero, intimidade e linguagem. Sobre a mediação semiótica, Povinelli falou da sua conexão com a Antropologia Linguística, a Psicanálise e a Semiótica peirceana, as condições corporais da comunicação humana e mais que humana, as forças subjetivantes das metapragmáticas das línguas, as condições semióticas do sujeito e a terra, e as conexões desses temas com as formas colonialistas racistas no Liberalismo.

Palavras-chave: Semiótica; Subjetividade; Metapragmática; Liberalismo.

Resumen: Durante el primer semestre de 2022 en la Universidad de Columbia, Joana Plaza Pinto asistió a dos cursos de posgrado de la Profesora Franz Boas de Antropología y Estudios de Género Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Semiótica 2* y *Teoría Feminista*. Bajo la influencia de estos cursos, esta entrevista es una de sus múltiples conversaciones relacionadas con la relación entre género, intimidad y lenguaje. Sobre la mediación semiótica, Povinelli habló sobre su vinculación con la Antropología Lingüística, el Psicoanálisis y la Semiótica peirceana, las condiciones corporales de la comunicación humana y más-que-humana, las fuerzas de subjetivación de la metapragmática de los lenguajes, las condiciones semióticas del sujeto y la tierra, y las conexiones de estos temas con formas colonialistas racistas en el Liberalismo.

Palabras llave: Semiótica; Subjetividad; Metapragmática; Liberalismo.

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Joana: To begin, could you tell us about your trajectory in Linguistic Anthropology? You have a BA in Philosophy and Mathematics, you're well known in Anthropology field and Gender Studies, and you also call yourself a critical theorist and a filmmaker. So how does Linguistic Anthropology fit in this landscape of fields and theories?

Elizabeth: I went to St. John's College² in 1984. St. John's was still a hippie and artist hangout on the one hand, and this really intense and interesting space where Hopi and Navajo engaged in intra Native-American politics and both in relation to Anglo-Hispanic settler politics. So, it was super interesting social and political space. St. Johns College was situated above the town on the edge of a hill. It is the great book's program — the program begins with the Greeks, moves to the British Enlightenment, then the German philosophies of Kant and Hegel. I received a Watson Fellowship after graduating and I went to Australia for the first time. I met the older men and women — the parents and grandparents of the senior Karrabing.³ I was still a philosopher. But when my fellowship year was over, these older women and men had requested that I become an Anthropologist to help them with a land claim over the place they lived. I had no idea what an anthropologist was. But I got into Yale in 1986. At the time, Yale Anthropology had many great linguistics: Keith Basso, Joe [Joseph] Errington, and other linguistically oriented people like Harold Conklin and [Floyd] Lounsbury. Other faculty focused on cultural and political economy. Most of my friends were, however, in English and Comparative Literature, where Derrida, De Man, Bakhtin, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis were dominant names and theoretical formations. My background in Philosophy prejudiced me toward Linguistics — the kind of theoretical questions they were asking seemed to be crucial, questions of sign mediation, what could a sign do, those kinds of questions. So, I just took a lot of Anthropology classes with Keith Basso and Joe Errington. I even took the phonology test where you have to differentiate sounds, but in Anthropology so no big deal [Laughs]. So, I guess I shouldn't

² At Santa Fe, California, USA.

³ Indigenous community at Belyuen on the Cox Peninsula in the Northern Territory of Australia.

have been surprised that when I was first on the job market, Emory University⁴ interpreted me as a linguistic anthropologist.

Joana: So, there was the moment where the expression got you.

Elizabeth: Well, we had Linguistic Anthropology at Yale. So, I knew what Linguistic Anthropology was, but I wasn't in [emphasis] Linguistic Anthropology. I was in cultural anthropology. Yale was four [Anthropology] fields. My youngest brother was also in the department — in Physical Anthropology. So, I was like "what? You want me to apply for the linguistic anthropology postdoc?" And the Emory faculty member said "Yes, we heard our postdoc in Linguistic Anthropology would be perfect for it." I was like "Me?", and then I thought, "oh God, I need a job". So, I said "yes". So, my first job was to teach courses on language, culture and power and introduction to Linguistic Anthropology. I had heard about Michael Silverstein's work from Errington. Although to be honest, I can't remember when I started just picking up little pieces and reading it. What I was drawn to was the metapragmatic framings that mediate make sense of speech events. Other cultural interpretation seemed so flat to me. As if "culture" was "there" like an apple on a table. I thought, "where?" [Laughs]. I was at Emory for a one year. And then I went to Cornell University. They also wanted that I also teach language courses, and I continued to teach my language, culture and power. And then after three years, I went to the University of Chicago. And Chicago was filled with people who were just not kidding. They were 24/7 academically insane. I thought that would be good for me to be pushed to take the academic side of my life as seriously as I took my life with my Indigenous colleagues. At the time, I would swing in and do my job and get paid, so that I could swing back to Australia and work on projects that my Indigenous colleagues thought were important. Back and forth, the former originally just instrumental to the latter. I didn't want to make my work with my Indigenous colleagues instrumental to my academic work, but I did want to see if

⁴ At Atlanta, Georgia, US.

I could make intellectual life something more serious. This is because there's a part of my brain that really just finds diagrammatic thinking so super fun. I sat in the Michigan-Chicago Linguistic Circle and in the various seminars run by the Center for Transcultural Studies.

Joana: Does it make sense for your fieldwork in Australia or not? You started by their demand to you becoming an Anthropologist. How does this connect?

Elizabeth: Yeah, my life as an academic was authored by these, now deceased, men and women who asked that I help them. Part of what they thought necessary was understanding the local linguistic multiplicity. Some Karrabing did a piece of the ideology of this multiplicity for *Specimen* that might interest readers (<http://www.specimen.press/writers/karrabing/>) In 1984, when I first went to Belyuen, the lingua franca was Creole, sometimes called Aboriginal English. The 20 or so older women also spoke Emmiyengal, Marriammu and Batjemalh. In 1989, we sat down and did what they called language-language every day — so after my first book. But mainly we were speaking in Creole. My archive includes hundreds of hours of conversations that some Karrabing are now using as language learning. Would I say I ever mastered all these languages, or speak them fluently? No. My fluency is in Creole I know Emmi more than I know Batjemalh. The verb forms are really interesting — and were originally passed along to Creole. There's a lot of positionality in the basic verb stems: standing, sitting, moving, emerging, hanging, thrusting, direction action, dragging, manifesting, looking. So focal attention from a verbal point of view. But, in fact, most people are speaking Creole. I love it, I love the language and we communicate the same thing: get up, come out, go under, "Kakathenikarru", "he gets up and goes!" Or let's go, people get up, go. So, there's a lot of direct translating. We do think about it because language is so important to the landscape.

Joana: Yes, that's why I'm asking. I see some of this discussion in your work, especially about the event forms.

Elizabeth: Yes, to “manifest,” or “show himself,” as we say in Creole, is terrifically important in the human and more-than-human relations that define the worlds of Karrabing/Belyuen. But the verb form gains its sense from a set of shared or divergent assumptions about the conditions that trigger the difference between seeing something and seeing that something is showing you something. Visual sense indicated by the different perspectives of seeing and being made available to sight is related to a broader understanding of the bodily conditions of human and more-than-human communication. For example, the totemic country is more likely to make itself visible when it recognizes the “sweat” of a person or group. It also can hear/feel the difference between languages. Language is considered to be a substance not equivalent to smell but not disjunctive to smell. In other words, from a semiotic perspective language is subsumed in broad metapragmatic of human relations to the more-than-human landscape. This semiotic ideology is often at odds with settler law. For instance, in the land claims I have participated, lawyers often prioritize texts—totemic narratives often sung—that explicitly specify the who, what, where, and why of their enunciation: who is singing, why they are signing, to whom, and what about. But the song traditions of the Karrabing/Belyuen were maximally contextual and composed to have multiple meanings. A song might simply say, “here I sit, eating oysters, thinking of you.” Some might know who the person is, where they were sitting, who they were thinking about. But over time, these contextual elements fade into the landscape. But wherever they are sung, they unfold their metapragmatic web of social relations, the land hearing things we might no longer be able to. They are not legally evidentiary texts. They don't say who's singing. They don't say whom they're singing for. Often, they are composed of just a verb form, an affect form, and deictic. I discussed this in “The Poetics of Ghosts” in *The Cunning of Recognition* (POVINELLI, 2007). What happens to textual

content and form under the pressure of state-based recognition regimes that demand a specific form of evidence.

Joana: How did Pragmatics and Psychoanalysis start to make sense in this discussion?

Elizabeth: As I said, when I was in Graduate School at Yale, psychoanalysis was a dominant theoretical trend in Comparative Literature, De Mannian and Derridean deconstruction in English Literature, and Linguistics in Anthropology. Joe Errington, a student of Michael Silverstein, was introducing us to metapragmatics. Keith Basso was just a beautiful, wonderful, amazing teacher. So, it just became really interesting. So, as I was reading in each of these traditions, I was reading them through each other and against other ways of conceptualizing social mediation — structuralism, structural Marxism. I became particularly sensitive to the abstraction of agency on the one hand and the individualization of agency on the other. So, as much as I appreciated Derrida, I would hear things that gave me pause. For instance, his argument that “genres invaginate each other”. I didn’t care about the sexual logic, I stopped at the attribution of agency to an abstraction — genres. I thought, “no, they [emphasis] don’t”. In using them, we [emphasis] do so. Not consciously. But they work through us in the play of the collaterality of sign; they depend on us, or are us and us them in the dance of presupposition and entailment. I remember being particularly struck by one of Silverstein’s unpublished papers about the two strangers meeting each other in a room.⁵ It’s one of his early works on the difference between denotational and the interactional texts. The conversation (denotation text) is supplemented by columns of marginalia demonstrating how indexicality anchors the meaning of the denotational text to an interactional text. What they are saying is pointing to and presupposing an entirely different space of social positionality — before we can begin this conversation, they are *not* saying, we

⁵ Povinelli is mentioning a draft and former version of the paper published many years later in Silverstein (1997).

need to situate ourselves in a framework of who, what, where, and why we are relationally. The social work is negotiating the interactional framework, hidden by denotational flotsam. It made me super paranoid when I listened to other people — I suddenly was attentive to what people were trying to make me *into* in order to have a conversation with me. All identity and social ordering are at risk if the metaindexical frames — the interactional text — is challenged, distorted, unrecognized, refused.

As I read Freud and Lacan, and became deeply aware how much Derrida was influenced by psychoanalysis, the rationale for Foucault's turn away from it, and Deleuze's refiguration of it, I began to wonder what psychoanalysis would look like if our theory of subjectivity was informed by metapragmatics rather than the structuralism that informed the Lacanian School, or even the deconstructive impulses of Fanon, Irigaray, and Derrida. I also was curious how anthropological models of the subject would need to change if informed by the spirit of psychoanalysis. Anthropologists at the time tended to assume a subject already linguistically formed — and they focused primarily on languages and discourses of emotions rather than on affective elements such as desire. Psychoanalytic theory tended to be divided by schools with near fascist allegiance to the bibles of the founding fathers. I began fairly early mapping out a course of thought that tried to understand the stakes of coming into a language metapragmatically. What if we anchored the subject in a becoming metaindexically? I recently published a little essay that evokes my longstanding interest in how Peircean diagrammatic reason simultaneously evokes and disturbs social existence — thus how diagrammatic reasoning refers back to an inward acquaintance with the semiotic scaffolding of region of existence that literally gives it and us shape. Peirce described the diagram as “a representamen which is predominantly an icon of relations and is aided to be so by conventions. Indices are also more or less used. It should be carried out upon a perfectly consistent system of representation, one founded upon a simple and easily intelligible basic idea” (PEIRCE, 1903, p. 492). He also probed the

experiential logics of *rationality* when in the vicinity of diagrams. While Peirce understood the diagram to be an “Icon of a set of rationally related objects,” what he meant by “rationally related” was that “there is between them, not merely one of those relations which we know by experience, but know not how to comprehend, but one of those relations which anybody who reasons at all must have an inward acquaintance with.” (STJERNFELT, 2000, p. 363). We have a feeling for the inner diagram — the *trotte-bébé* — that is the body each of us introjected already shaped by the pleasures and disciplines of racial and gendered schematics, as well as countless other modes of corporeal distribution. These diagrams are in constant motion as they seek to maintain or disturb their equilibrium in relation to others doing the same — i.e., the realtime unfolding of denotational texts (diagrams) relative to interactional texts (the inner relationality between diagrams). Subjectivity is the accumulation and disturbance in the play of desire toward or away from this radically relational balance.

Joana: How is this way to see semiotic mediation important to discuss the political?

Elizabeth: This brings up the difference between Semiotics and Linguistics. Chicago was a powerhouse of **Linguistic** [emphasis] Anthropology and the origin of metapragmatic anthropology. We could say that at the heart of metapragmatic innovation was the Peircean revolution in semiotics. I will come back to whether this is true for Peirce, but for the Chicago School, the human was presupposed as the subject of linguistics and semiotics. Of course, humans borrowed their subjectivity from language, as Benveniste showed. But only humans had subjectivity because they alone were cognitively shaped in such a way that they and language could be intimately related. On the one hand, I was drawn to the more precise semiotic tools offered by a metapragmatic approach — I was tired of the overuse of *signifier* and *signified* in critical theory, the weight they were forced to bear, their anachronistic quality — and the location

of semiotic process — their location in immanent social process. On the other hand, the reduction of semiotic analysis to human semiosis was untenable to the Indigenous men and women who so fundamentally determined my thinking and practice. I began to wonder what ontological presuppositions grounded various semiotic approaches. Which ones could be in productive relationship with my Karrabing/Belyuen understandings of their communicative/interpretive relations with their more-than-human kin. And not merely with other biome but across the divide of Life and Nonlife — the divide being the effect of what I have called geontopower (POVINELLI, 2016). And, finally, I began to think more about how semiotics could be, was already, not a truth/reference theory but an immanent practice — it theorized that semiosis is a practice of becoming even when becoming is about *ongoingness* and semiosis itself a practice *within* this play of becoming ongoing. Take for example Rex Edmunds statement that his totem Mudi (Barramundi fish) is the reef that sits at the end of Mabaluk (POVINELLI & EDMUNDS, 2019). The statement constitutes a relation of kinship (totemic) across difference (human and more-than-human); a relation of affect and obligation (caretaking) and refusal (against those who figure the reef as in truth an ecology on top of which a cultural interpretation has been laid); and an intervention in the multiple possible practices that could occur in relation to him and the Mudi totem (mining, heritage, sacred site registration, climate research et cetera). Moreover, Mudi-the-Reef constantly signals its own relation to all of the above in terms of its composition, relative position to tides and sands, responsiveness to temperature variation. And, finally, even the question of where/what is the reef is a semiotically mediated practice of interpretation. Is it at the edge of its reef-rock composition? The fish and other more mobile entities that nibble and rest within its crags? The sands that lodge under it or give way? And what, who, how is sending interpretable signs to whom? Every answer to these kinds of questions are practices that potentially keep in place or alter the relationship between the complex materialized signbody Rex and the complex materialized signbody Mudi. If I say, “Mudi is an ancestor”, like “it’s Rex’s ancestor”

and I'm obligated to Rex because of just the descent of caretaking from others, then the semiotic mediation of that is a different practice which manifested a different world. I get so tired of the truth/false question because that's not metapragmatic semiotics. Metapragmatics, for me, doesn't ask if it is true or false, it asks what you make in setting up these sign relations.

Joana: This is why your work is about the political, right?

Elizabeth: Yes. The purpose of developing new conceptual approaches isn't to advance knowledge — as if knowledge was an army on the march toward victory — but to intervene in a political ordering of existence. You can hear, feel what's going on and counter it. I was talking to Linda Yarrowin, a member of Karrabing, this morning. She was telling me about a conversation she and her sister's daughters, Angelina and Cecilia Lewis, were having with a local politician. They were trying to explain to him about how a local *mirrh* (a conception totem) produced human relations to country. Rather than the descent of bodies, a dominant anthropological diagram of human relationality (kinship and *descent*), they were describing the ascent from country of bodies — country authoring the substance of human bodies. This ascent of bodies is in relation to the descent of bodies but not merely in the biological sense. The descent of bodies is also about how, after being birthed from the land and through the human biological process, they return to the land physically (bodies, clothes, sweat). The land unfolds and refolds humans into it. In any case, what Linda was describing was a conversation in which truth was transformed into mythology/cultural belief — the politician believing she and her daughters believed but did not believe himself. I have described a similar instance in "Do Rocks Listen?" (POVINELLI, 1995). Rather than being caught in the trap of abstracted truth — what Linda said was true or false about things in the world — the idea is to walk away from this western epistemic trap and understand how truth claims are

world-building or destroying. If we treat this *mirrh* site as *mirrh* was, is kept in place as a constellation of internally related beings — to keep in place a trajectory of becoming ongoing?

Joana: I was thinking on how liberal ideologies or liberal semiotic mediations are taking over all other mediations, shaping our ways of doing semiotic mediation.

Elizabeth: Yes, exactly. Karrabing/Belyuen is an intersection of multiple forms of semiotic mediation. Some people were trying to shape the trajectory of things toward a Christian evangelicalism, and some people trying to shape it toward keeping this thick ancestral obligation. Some folks are really interested in science and how that might articulate or not articulate with ancestral landscapes. Sexuality, gender, and kinship are in play as well — the difference between what cross-cousins could and can do because of their kinship and what it means within the framework of heteronormativity. So, whatever anyone personally thinks about our gay and trans kids everyone has to have a relationship to this emergent play of these gender interpretants. Ditto with language forms. There is a tension between those who try to keep a language pure — not surprisingly, I suppose, folks for whom Indigenous languages are not their first language — and those who play. I love the play. And it's everywhere. I remember when my grandchild's generation started using the word *bopsy* for 'sister'. My generation was like, what does that mean? Where did that come from? They answered, "You guys say 'mana' or 'mele' for brother and sister. We say 'bopsy'. Our generation's turn." So, there's just a lot of play. The question is how can you keep crucial forms of sociality in place, even as things change and as you engage in these big arguments about what world these semiotic mediations are making and thus what we will become within them. Psychoanalytically we can say that these struggles are about how we become forms of flesh that have particular relations to particular places, particular kinds of ancestral manifestations, et cetera. Who will own the semiotic conditions that

provide the skeletal frame of being, especially given the very idea of ownership is saturated by liberal ideas of property and its law. Aileen Moreton-Robinson lays out the stakes of this struggle to constitute worlds in *The White Possessive* (2015). The semiotic mediation of all forms of existence by a western framework of property — are you possessed, possessing, possessable, et cetera — provides a skeletal frame through which existence becomes actual, potential existence becomes actual relatable existence. So, the political lies here — at the surface between the potentially actual and the actual. This surface, semiotically complex and competing crust between potential and actual is ongoing — and ongoing within actual discursive forms. Take, for example, something that happened during a road building project that some of Karrabing undertook near Mabaluk. Some of us had been talking for years and years about bush-whacking a road from an old mining track to a coastal region, a stretch of about twenty kilometers. This stretch of country is quite remote, a seven-hour drive from the Darwin across good highways and then ever more wrecked dirt roads. We had planned to whack the road slow and steady, section by section, camping out along the way. The area was covered in thick, dry waist high grass and populated by various palms and trees. We started out slow and steady. But after the first lunch, Rex Edmunds had enough with slow and steady. He decided to use his truck as a plow. To see where we were going, we all started lighting fires — a traditional form of land clearing. But just as the evening was approaching, Rex's truck had had enough. The radiator was blown. Now the fires were everywhere. When my truck pulled up behind his, Rex's partner Cecilia Lewis asked me, "Mom, do you know how to make a fire break?" I replied, "Not really". She's noted, "We're going to die. And all of us said, "Not today". Cecilia has asthma so we put her in my truck with the air conditioner on as we beat back the fire. Then we dragged the crippled car back through the burning bush to another beach camp. The next day a group of us drove the seven hours back to Darwin to get a new radiator and some tools. After a few days we all returned to Belyuen. What we found was a whirlwind of interpretants, metapragmatic framings, of what caused our little calamity — and I've left out tons of the details.

A dominant interpretation was “poisoned country.” No one should go back because there were dangerous ancestral spirits trying to kill us. Another interpretation was that we shouldn’t do anything without the proper equipment. But another, the one we believed was that because no one had set foot on those lands for hundreds of years, the ancestors were jealous, they sung out to Rex in such a way they he couldn’t stop himself from trying to make it to the shore in one day. Jealousy is a reaction of all things, not just ancestors, to people who do not attend to you. Jealousy is a reaction to being abandoned, neglected. And all things are preset to be jealous — to lash out when you first return, to test if you really care by punishing you. Karrabing’s film *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreaming* is explicitly about this. If we didn’t go back, the ancestors would understand us as not caring enough and close off the land for good — that we were making excuses, caring about other things like our cars or jobs or whatever. This interpretation became dominant when a GPS device we thought wasn’t working was. It showed that we were less than a kilometer from the beach we were aiming at. So, we went back and finished the road, singing out to the ancestors that we were back. They opened the country, and we sailed through. By caring first for the country, we could also care first for the kinds of bodily relations made possible within this human-land nexus. One of the ways Liberalism dispossesses people from land is to make places abstract entities — *things* that one does not have an internal kinship relation to. Glen Coulthard talks about this in *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014). And what we are trying to do is maintain semiotically mediated modes of affective belonging between humans and places that come into being best when the human body is unfolded in relation to them. This brings me back to what a metapragmatic psychoanalysis might consist of. Rex Edmunds describes it as getting country into a child before the child knows it is being formed. The body and its semiotic anchors and extension, so to speak, are *in the land*. When my first great granddaughter was born, I told her mom I wanted to give her the name *Kaingmerrhe* (Sun) — the sunshine of my life but also a totemic place near Mabaluk. The senior women all agreed and voila.

When her sister had my second great grandchild, we named her *Penidjibhe* for the star totem next to the sun totem. Because we had made the road to Mabaluk, these two children came into language in relation to the semiotic anchor between themselves and the landscape. “That’s you.” A classic Lacanian form of subjectivity but anchored in the mirror of the ancestral landscape. The ancestral past and its future flowing through the identity and identification of bodies formed as a relational matrix. And these two kids plus many others are now super, what...

Joana: Engaged?

Elizabeth: Yes, Penidjibhe in particular is quite a talker. By the time she was probably two or three she was telling us how we were going down to Mabaluk where she and her sisters were (star sisters). The hope is that it will be harder to intervene in human and land relations if bodies are intimately and explicitly internally related to them. Because in the semiotic mediated world we are fostering, if someone wants to mine on your land — say at or new *Star Dreaming* — then they are asking to cut into your body. My wager is that if people would work or rework metapragmatics or semiotic ontologies, we would have a stronger political imaginary.

Joana: I agree. I think we must hear more about other ways of thinking politically. That’s why I love your work, it’s a way of politically hearing. But it’s really hard to think differently.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that’s right, it’s really hard to think, it’s really hard to change your skeletal system, which is really, what if we really take this system seriously, yeah?

Joana: And we are surround by people, right? We had this big rain in Brazil about two weeks ago, and the landslides went down in Petrópolis⁶...

⁶ On February 15, 2022, floods and 775 landslides occurred in Petrópolis, a city located in Região Serrana in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Elizabeth: Yeah, I saw that.

Joana: It was terrible. More than 300 died, as far as you know by now, I mean, we don't know yet how many really died. But now the Brazilian media only talks about Ukrainian war, the big rain tragedy is not important anymore. It's the sole frame now in liberal media.

Elizabeth: I know. In everyday life, we do Liberalism. If I want to eat that orange, I have to do Liberalism right.

Joana: Yeah, reading the news, you do Liberalism.

Elizabeth: Yes, so it's really hard to think differently. I've often said, "To say 'not this' is something, even if you don't know what. In Karrabing it's hard because is just endless. How has this even stayed? The word "surviving" is good for this. How has this persisted even? It is kind of like a miracle, and so we just focus on that and keep it going. But we're bombarded. In the semiotic basis, in the robust sense of that, the families have billions of modes of belonging to the place in each other, that are just refused by Liberal law. It's so weird because we say "well, of course, you're born from", and there's these condensation places and they send out stuff. Sweat is really important for us, the sensory hierarchy is very different, so language is a substance, sweat is a substance. Sweat is a really important substance because smell is so crucial. So, smell, sound, and of course the substance of language. When we go out all the time, putting your sweat in the country, pissing in the country, you're literally leaving your remains behind. Then you're eating from the world, and so it's going in you. Sometimes, we'll be in a conversation, like when we're doing a film and someone asks a question, then someone will answer it and the answer really great and the person will just ask it again, asking them to say, "you explain it"; I say, "I can't explain it any better than you". I do not understand why this is so damn difficult. Yeah, because it's the answer rotation that keeps Liberal Capitalism in a place that would

be displaced if “one understood what people were saying”. And it’s not just capitalism, but folks, their most precious insides, I mean, the deeper you go, we know your body is generic, it’s a genre, your most precious and personal thoughts, feelings, and expressions.

Joana: I have a last question. In your last book *Between Gaia and Ground* (POVINELLI, 2021), you talk about a common syntax. What do you mean with “common syntax”?

Elizabeth: There are a couple of things. It’s very late settler liberal syntax, in which there is an embedded hierarchy, the relationship between the first three axioms and then the 4th which recapitulates a liberal form of thought or syntax of thought. Honestly, when I wrote that I was thinking a syntax in the sense of a position things have to go in to make sense.

Joana: A syntagmatic?

Elizabeth: Yeah, I was thinking where the noun has to be and then you can mess. I was thinking on a syntagmatic. So, for instance, the first you have to establish is the ontological conditions. Then you say how those ontological conditions are organized socially. Then you say within that social world, what are the political possibilities of maneuver and eventfulness, right? So, first, second, third, and then. But also in critical theory, because of the very strong and important pressure of race critique and decolonial or anticolonial critique, you slap on top of that and “the epistemologies and ontologies that emerged in the wake of thing are not only provincial, but the cause of the collapse of the world”, or something like that. And then they just put it on top of that. Wait a minute, no. What happens if you change the syntax?

Joana: Change the order, right?

Elizabeth: Yeah, the order. What if you change the order? What appears and what disappears? Like the ontological questions: why

does that matter? Where is that? If we're really thinking this different semiotic "ontology", which is a really semiotic sedimentation, so for me there's not an ontology, there's sedimentation within those long histories, by most recently and most impactful the history of like Black Atlantic and Indigenous Pacific and America, and the terraforming of the Earth that's going on, and the terraforming of social relations that have gone on. So, you don't need an ontology; you have a sedimentation. Does that help?

Joana: Certainly! It's very important. Thank you, Beth, for your time.

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