Bodies of Philosophy: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz

***Stance* (Esther Wolfe): How did you become interested in philosophy? What do you find sustains that interest, and what do you most enjoy about your career?**

Elizabeth Grosz: I think I was probably a little philosopher, even at twelve, but I didn't know what it was called. Big questions about the meaning of life—is there God, causation—were things that, unlike other twelve-year-olds, I thought about quite deeply. So, I was very happy to find a subject at university called Philosophy. And I didn't actually intend to do it. I intended to do psychology, and, to this day I'm actually not sure why I did philosophy. [laughter] But the moment I started doing it, it was really fascinating. It provided me with a framework for thinking—a rigor in thinking about the world. So, I found my place. I was very lucky. It wasn't quite as an undergraduate, but by the time I was doing graduate work, I just thought, "This is a place that's good for me."

***Stance* (EW): We're all smiling because I think, for everyone here, that resonated very deeply.**

EG: Yeah, what I enjoy most about it is the opportunity to think about things and to read really smart people.

***Stance* (EW): [laughter] We like that, too… The field of philosophy is often criticized for being unwelcoming or hostile toward women philosophers and feminist philosophy; what have been your experiences as a woman in philosophy, and can you talk about the state of feminism in the field of philosophy today?**

EG: Very good question—the most pertinent question of the present, as far as I'm concerned. My own history in philosophy was complicated by the fact that I began philosophy just before the first wave of feminism hit theory (this is in Australia). When I began, there was only one woman teaching, and she had an untenured position. Philosophy was absolutely hostile to women when I began, and I have to say that, as we know, the field of philosophy is very much divided into two quite different orientations, at least in the Anglo-American world.

I think Anglo-American philosophy is also quite hostile to the question of women in philosophy and feminist philosophy even today. I know that if I hadn't found continental philosophy I wouldn't have been able to continue

this project. I've noticed that continental philosophy has certainly, in the last thirty years, been relatively open—and far more than other disciplines—to feminist questions, to women philosophers, to meetings about the status of women in philosophy, to accepting that there is a problem with the status of women in philosophy, and trying to do something about it.

So, I have a sense that probably the bulk of young women studying philosophy today probably experience something similiar to what I did in the 1970s, and that is not many women teachers and not much encouragement for their particular kinds of questions. But I also know that there are departments now that have continental philosophy or at least some continental philosophy who are now not only very open to women but actively supportive. So, things have changed a lot in one part of philosophy, but really not in another.

***Stance* (Ben Rogers): I'm really curious also about other groups that have been excluded from the philosophical enterprise. The whiteliness of philosophy is a problem. The straightness of philosophy is a problem as well. Could you speak at all about the particulars of those problems and how they relate to feminist concerns in philosophy today?**

EG: Well, I think you're absolutely correct in suggesting that these are equally kinds of unconscious exclusions whose unconsciousness has made them somewhat invisible in philosophy, the realm of so-called reason itself, a reason unmarked by the body's distinctive features. I don't think there's particularly malice on the part of analytic philosophy as opposed to any other academic discipline, but I do think that the idea that knowledge is untouched by the particularities of the person who knows is a fantasy.

[More recently,] there's been a lot of resistance to the whiteness of philosophy, the straightness of philosophy, the Europeanness of philosophy, as well as the masculinity of philosophy. In other words, it's only because there's been resistance among minoritized groups that these questions can be raised as something other than just a regional question in a way that, for example, the abortion debate has been framed within philosophy or within ethics, as just a particular example of a broader more general and question, rather than as a question that holds different value for different kinds of philosophers.

***Stance* (EW): I was thinking as you were talking about regional concerns and about how western philosophy specifically has dominated a lot of discourse. It would be really interesting to get your perspective on things like post-colonial feminisms, especially as a native Australian who has been exposed to a lot of criticism of Australia's own colonial**

HISTORY. I'M CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR OWN PHILOSOPHICAL INTERSECTIONS WITH POST-COLONIAL FEMINISMS.

EG: Well, I think obviously post-colonial feminism is a huge and growing area, but within philosophy, again, it's a minority of a minority. There are certainly conferences and networks for post-colonial and post-colonial feminist philosophy. I suspect that they're growing stronger and stronger. But I think it's only because there's been a resistance to the kind of unconscious whiteness and unconscious lack of awareness of colonialism and its impact that philosophy has had the history it has had.

Now, let me say that, of course, feminist philosophy is not without criticism, and there have been powerful criticisms developed by a number of subjects within the feminist movement, for example, who would have wanted to claim that certain strands of feminism, perhaps my own included, were too wide or not acknowledged enough as wide? I think that's probably true of every position, that it represents a specificity that can't necessarily be assumed to be globally true.

"oppression... necessitates sideways thinking. It produces new thought...so I feel very optimistic"

Philosophy is made up of perspectives, which is something that I think many people are resistant to. There are many points of view from which we can ask philosophical questions, and they're not just relative. They are kind of absolute and linked to one's position, one's geographical and historical position. All philosophy is specific and all philosophy is neither particularly colonial nor post-colonial but is engaged in the global movement that makes up both of those orders. I do feel optimistic. I do see lots of possibilities, and they're possibilities that I don't see really being very readily erased.

***STANCE* (EW): OUR STAFF WAS ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN YOUR ARGUMENTS THAT FEMINISTS SHIFT THEIR CRITICAL FOCUS FROM LIBERATING WOMEN AND CONSIDERING WOMEN MERELY THE SUBJECTS IN FEMINISM. CAN YOU EXPAND ON WHY THIS SHIFT OF A FEMINIST CRITICAL FRAMEWORK IS IMPORTANT?**

EG: I think partly because making women and women alone—women in their classed and raced and sexed specificity—the subject of feminism tends to make women victims. It tends to see patriarchy as an order that does little more than oppress women or subject them to faults, and, while I don't want to deny that that's true, I think if we focus alone on women as subjects and not on the world within which subjects are produced and act, we tend to focus

on the bad things that oppression does instead of on the creative possibilities that oppression opens up.

That's the simple answer to that, but what oppression does is invent ingenuity. It necessitates sideways thinking. It produces new thought sooner or later, so I feel very optimistic that *possibility* is always there in philosophy, however oppressed one's position. But the more one looks inward the darker it looks, so I actually think that feminism has had a couple of decades of self-analysis. I think it's probably really healthy now to have a look at the world in relation to one's self. I think that might be a really productive next step in feminist theory.

***Stance* (EW): That answer got a very quiet round of applause from several of our staff.**

EG: [laughter]. I love that acknowledgement of the transformative and generative potential embedded in liberation struggles and within oppressive systems, and I think it's amazing. We wouldn't be around to talk about it if oppression just pressed us out of existence. And those of us who end up surviving have a resilience or something that's other than or a little bit outside of the system that's oppressing us.

***Stance* (EW): You've discussed using ideas that seem anti-feminist, such as Darwinism and looking past sexist tendencies to find concepts within these ideas that are helpful to feminism. I think Lacan would also be on that list, too. What limit, if any, is there to using ideas from thinkers who have been counterproductive to the feminist movement? Do you think a feminist must simply look past sexist ideas and find truth and meaning in those works that are related to sexist ideas? How does one mediate and navigate that?**

EG: Well, this is one of the particular tragedies of those studying philosophy. If you look at anything before, let's say, 1950, you're not going to find a text that doesn't have something sexist in it. There isn't going to be a text before the 1950s, and probably long after that, which considers women as equal. I can't think of a text that doesn't have some snide comment about women, about mothers, about femininity, about sex, about passion or emotion. It's very difficult to be a philosopher who has the right to not look at texts that say sexist things. It wouldn't be doing philosophy. Basically, we'd have to do another discipline. So, we have no choice but to address texts that have sexist tendencies. That's what it is to be in a patriarchal world.

These aren't necessarily sources of contamination. I think that some feminists have thought of them in this way. These are resources that feminists can use: seeing the sexism in someone and not just dismissing them because of it but

finding the place of sexism in their work and finding something that may be in their work beyond that sexism is the feminist philosophical enterprise. That's what our discipline entails. Whatever the texts are prior to, say, the 1980s when feminist philosophy erupts as a field, we're not going to find texts that are in the slightest bit sensitive to sexism or even racism or class. So, it's all right to get our hands dirty. That's our profession.

Even though we may not like it, we work with all sorts of ideas we really disagree with. I have a lot of problems with Plato, just to take an obvious example, but he's still immensely important: same with Darwin, same with psychoanalysis. Darwin's good compared to most people. His best friend was John Stuart Mill, so he was somewhat more inclined to feminism than a good many others. It's like saying, "Can we have non-sexist fashion?" and the answer is, "No, not really," but that doesn't mean we can't enjoy it.

***Stance* (EW): You've been critical of the use of "queer" as a self-identifying term, and also of the work of queer theory. Since queer theory as a movement and as a methodology has really developed since some of that scholarship, we were wondering if some of your opinions have changed.**

EG: I don't think my opinions have changed, but I think I've been misunderstood. I think the word "queer" is a politically useful term, but I'm not sure it's a conceptually useful term. So, if people self-identify as queer, I have no problem with that. The concept "queer," if we unpack what we generally tend to mean by it, is non-heteronormative practices. Am I right? But that's a problem, I think, for many, because that's a definition that's utterly reactive. To say you're non-heteronormative is almost by definition saying, "Well, heteronormative is the norm, and I'm against it." To me, that is the unifying quality of the generic term "queer" as opposed to the term LGBT.

So, queer is a useful label, but in fact what holds together a theory is people who identify as queer, some who also identify as gay, others who also identify as lesbian, some who identify as trans, and some who simply identify as queer. What allows them to be identified together is this stance against the heteronormative, copulative, family-oriented norm that we all know so well.

I'm not sure that I want to base a positive identity on a reaction to something that I think sucks. So, I've been taken as someone who's anti-queer. I don't think that's correct. The label worries me more than the practice. Is that enigmatic enough? [Laughter]. I mean, I wonder, who isn't queer? I have a whole bunch of heterosexual friends who are now queer. Close up, in fact, given psychoanalysis, everyone's utterly queer. But if that's true, if we're all

queer, then the political sharpness of that concept is somewhat muted. Now, remember, I'm talking about a label and not a movement.

***Stance* (EW): In a similar vein: how do intersex and transsexual individuals fit within your theory of sexual selection?**

EG: Oh, that's a very complicated question. I think they're part of the range of sexual selection. I don't think there's anything abnormal or weird about it. There is no doubt that in Darwin's studies there are a whole range of, as it were, queer animals and animals where males identified as females and so on. So, I don't think there's any mutual problem with Darwinism and transexualism or what we would now call intersexed bodies.

But I know that my work, especially in *Volatile Bodies*, has been quite heavily criticized in certain trans circles, and I'm not sure the criticism is fair. Of course, I'm biased. But the point I made in *Volatile Bodies* is something that I still believe. I'll say this nervously: we're born into a body, like it or not. The body is not made by us but given to us: partly through nature, partly through environment.

I'm not denying there's a social and psychical dimension, but I'm also not denying there's a biological dimension to this. Short, tall, blond, dark-haired, black, white—these are givens of your body, just as being male or female or intersex is a given of your body. I have no problem with the surgical transformation of your body or the chemical transformation of your body. I've no problem at all with it. But I think it's a category mistake to believe that by transforming the body you have you acquire the body of the opposite sex.

***Stance* (EW): I think that's a point of contention within trans communities as well. I see trans people who identify as trans in terms of a more absolute actualization into what they will become, and other people identify as trans as a transient state, where the identification is the between or beyondness sense of the term.**

EG: Look, I think that what identifications are is an absolutely interesting and open possibility. If we identify as women, if we identify as men, if we identify as neither, that's a very interesting question of the art of how to live one's life. But, honestly—I'll say it again, and I'll get into trouble again—I think many people are making a category mistake when they think that by altering their body chemically or surgically they're getting the body of another sex. That's just an intellectual mistake. They can appear like the other sex, they can feel like the other sex, but how do you know what the other sex feels like from inside? You can't ever know it. I have no antipathy to the impulse to do so or the action of doing so. But I know that, if you're born with a female body,

you're always going to have some variation of the female body, whatever you do to it.

I think it is very complicated, and I think in many ways it's a personal decision that I wouldn't ever want to interfere with. But, when you want to understand conceptually what it entails, you need to think very clearly about the distinction between identification, feeling as if you're in the wrong body, and trying to change that body. I mean, it's just about the only thing you can't change. You can alter things, but it's still the same body you're changing. It's the body that you are. It's not the body you are given because that relies on a fantasy of you being different than your body.

"It's not as if our body is a fixed thing. But it is a fixed perspective from which we see things. It's that through which I am"

***Stance* (EW): How do you mediate your criticisms and your conceptualizations of trans as a category? How do you negotiate that with the very real potential to participate in the institutional erasure of trans persons?**

EG: Well, I don't think I do. I've had many trans students. I personally feel very supportive of them. I think, on the contrary, I'm not undertaking a critique of trans. I'm undertaking a kind of philosophical investigation of what a body is. That's what my work is about. And one of the things about a body is that you can do all sorts of things to change it, but there's still something of its substance that remains, that abides. And, of course, our bodies change every seven years, every cell is replaced. It's not as if our body is a fixed thing. But it is a fixed perspective from which we see things. It's that through which I am, whatever it is I am. And I don't care about how it's categorized.

That's a political question, a personal question, perhaps. But I'm very interested in how it is that this body-mind interacts. And, when people feel there's a dissonance, I don't want to disagree with them, but I want to flesh out: what does it mean to feel like you've got the body of another sex? What does the other sex's body feel like? I can't conceptualize it. Can you? It's impossible to imagine. One can fantasize. I'm not suggesting one can't. But one can't really imagine.

***Stance* (EW): Do you experience intersections of activism in academic work in your own life as a philosopher? And do you have any advice for philosophy students who are grappling with the sometimes conflicting realms of academia and activism or theory in practice?**

EG: When I was younger, activism and academic work were two orientations that I had that were not entirely separate. I still believe that activism has a logic of its own. Since I've come to the U.S., about fifteen years ago, I haven't done much activism. Partly, honestly, because coming to work in state universities, I felt that my activism was actually involved in teaching. That teaching has two realms: one is the transmission of information, and the other is the radicalization of the classroom experience. I didn't have enough energy to do anything more than that. Maybe this is a problem of middle age.

Do I have advice for philosophy students who are grappling with these conflicting areas? I do. Keep them separate. [laughter] Then there's no conflict. They function in two different arenas. It's like asking the question, "Should I do sport and do philosophy?" And the answer is, "Yes." They are two different kinds of activities. It's not that you can't use philosophy in activism, but it's also true that philosophy isn't all that helpful in activism. Being there, showing up, doing things is more important in activism. And in philosophy our activism is reading books, writing things, grading, and talking to people. It shouldn't be diminished. It's what's called theoretical practice.

***Stance* (EW): I like that. I was about to ask you if you you think writing theory is ever a form of activism?**

EG: Well, I think it is, but, let's be frank: it's a form of elitist activism. In *Volatile Bodies,* I wrote. Do activists read it? Maybe. But if you want to be an activist, I wouldn't suggest it. If you want to be an activist, figure out a cause, and figure out the best way to direct yourself to it. Activism is partly about publicity, about making something visible and gaining support for it. Philosophy can help you to logically work out how best to do that without problematizing. So, my advice to people who want to do both is keep them separate. And use a bit of philosophy when it's useful in activism, and use a bit of activism when it's useful in philosophy. But don't assume they're the same thing.

***Stance* (EW): Recently, post-colonial theory has seen the development of decolonial aesthetics, which seems to share a similarity with your proposal for a non-aesthetic philosophy of art. Do you think a non-aesthetic philosophy of art is also decolonial?**

EG: Well, I've got to say that I'm really not an expert on global art in any way, so I have no doubt that there are huge and interesting projects going on globally. The only art I know really anything about is Aboriginal art from Australia. And I would be very reluctant to call that either decolonial or postcolonial; I think it's firmly still colonial.

I think that a position of indigenous subjects is different from a position of colonies. Indigeneities are on the verge of a kind of extinction, and the post-colonial has the potential for enormous resurgence, enormous transformation. I know that there's been a lot of work done on indigenous art, and that's really interesting because indigenous art is always on the cusp between the colonial, the pre-colonial, and the post-colonial . . . Maybe I should ask the question in return. What links do you find in post-colonial aesthetics?

***Stance* (EW): The idea is that aesthetics, as a methodology, is entrenched in colonialism, in western dominance. Decolonial aesthetics has been an exploration, an unlearning and restructuring of those hierarchies. I saw some connections between that and your non-aesthetic philosophy of art.**

EG: I think you're right because art has this very special place that's different from commerce and the commodity. There's something about art that occurs in even the most oppressive of situations, such as the concentration camp. Art is always the glimmering of the possibility of another future. If art's read as other than an artistic expression, it is always about the summoning up of a new future, and as such it's always a kind of political gesture. So, yeah, I would think there is an affinity. This is partly because I was just reading about a show on Aboriginal art that was about to close at the Tate. Art is always in the process of becoming commodity, so like wild business, it's the expression of the hope of an oppressed people and the expression of a history.

> ***"[Art is] about the summoning up of a new future, and as such it's always a kind of political gesture"***

There's another moment at which, to the extent that this is successful, it becomes nothing but another commodity in the circuit of world art prices and the global economy more generally. There's a position between simply speaking for one's people and being consumed in the world of economics where no one or nothing in particular counts. And that, I think, is the plight of the post-colonial artist or even a colonized artist: how can one summon something up that isn't simply consumable?

***Stance* (EW): I wanted to ask about this definition of art that you posit in *Chaos, Territory, Art*. You talk about art being like a framed fragment of chaos, an extracted fragment of chaos. You claim that art doesn't produce concepts, rather it's just extracted frames. And to me, thinking about what you were just saying about the commodification of art, it seems that it's difficult to imagine how art**

doesn't produce concepts. It's difficult to imagine how art doesn't constantly reassert meaning and signification.

EG: It's not that art doesn't produce concepts. I think this is a common misreading of Deleuze. Certainly art critics produce concepts about art. So, it might well have conceptual content, but it's not captured by a concept in a way that a philosophy is captured. Cartesianism is capturable by a dozen concepts, just as the work of Jackson Pollock is capturable by a certain style. But the style isn't about ideas, even though my ideas may flow about it. It's about paint. It's about movement. It's about orientation: horizontal, vertical. So, art might well generate ideas; philosophy might well generate percepts and affects, but by chance—not inherently.

***Stance* (EW): *Sexual Subversions* was designed as a teaching tool to introduce undergraduates to French feminisms. If done today, would you focus on the same three philosophers? Are there new works you would want to include?**

EG: Well, that's a very, very tricky and political question. [laughter] The question really is, "Would I choose the same people now, and did they turn out to be as important as they seemed back then?" I'll be honest with you, if I had to do a book on three French feminists now, I would only choose Irigaray. At the time I wrote it, people assumed that the three would be Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous, who were the most well-known of the French feminists at that time. But at the time I didn't want to work on Cixous, largely because her work wasn't as philosophical as the work of Michèle Le Doeuff. I don't regret writing about Michèle Le Doeuff in any way, but I think if I had to do a similar version now I wouldn't include her. I would probably include a couple of the younger-generation French-speaking feminists. Perhaps Isabelle Stengers or Catherine Malabou. But definitely Irigaray still; she's still essential to me.

***Stance* (EW): You say feminism requires a better understanding of the real to develop its own ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies. We're undergraduates doing feminism: what do you think we need to understand of the real?**

EG: For undergraduates doing philosophy, and maybe feminist philosophy, I think we need to understand how the real is constructed. But I think for graduate students we need to ask the question, "What's it constructed out of?" I think that heuristically, for students, it's really important not to take the apparent givenness of the real as given. It needs to be subjected to a kind of critical reflection so that everyday opinions, advertizing images, silly beliefs that you get from school and from your friends are allowed to be filtered through some kind of critical reflection.

For undergraduate students, I think it's really important to understand that nature isn't given, that science is a way of us gathering together certain concepts that allow nature to be organized in a particular way. It would be really good to give undergraduate students a critical self-awareness of the construction of knowledge. At the graduate level, though, I think there are all sorts of popular positions, and it's about time we subject them to certain kinds of scrutiny. One of the things that I find problematic is the whole linguistic turn: where all of nature was in fact language, all of the real was symbolic, nature was historicized, history was the overcoming of nature.

***Stance* (EW): How have you seen feminism contribute to new modes of thinking, philosophizing, theorizing, and conceptualizing? This is a broad question, but, in that vein, what more do you think needs to be done?**

EG: I think feminism has contributed a lot in the last twenty years to the questioning of the whiteness, Euro-centrism, heteronormativity of the philosophical subject. I think that this is what it's developed in the last twenty years. Its future entails moving from an understanding of those limits to producing questions that are now not just reactive questions, but questions that are actively interesting in their own terms to women as philosophers: questions about the future, materiality, the universe; questions not only about epistemology, but also about ontology.

The question of the real is a question we didn't ask ten years ago. It seems a little weird now, because we're so naturalized, that one would even describe one's work as metaphysical. Ten years ago doing so would have been shocking and the kiss of death. It'd have been like saying, "I'm an essentialist and I'm proud of it." But the debates have changed. Certain debates have been lost, like the essentialism debate, or essentialism versus constructionism.

So, feminist philosophy has a whole potential, not just to talk about women and their minoritized position, but to talk about the world from the perspective of women. And, as Irigaray has made clear, half of knowledge is yet to be created. We have physics, we have mathematics, we have philosophy—but so far, for 5,000 years, they've been done by men. What would such a project look like—not just about ourselves but about the world—if it's done by both sexes and by all races?

***Stance* (EW): I think we've actually arrived at our last question, which is: what advice do you have for students who are interested in pursuing philosophy?**

EG: That's an excellent question in view of the current crisis in the humanities and the prognosis that none of us in the humanities will have a future at work or anywhere else. So, my advice for those students who want to go on in philosophy is make sure that you really love it. Make sure it's one of those things you really have to do because there's no joy in doing philosophy unless you have that feeling. But if you have that feeling, never compromise. Do it, and figure out a way to make a living later. Accept the reality that, if you have a PhD in philosophy, you may not be the most desirable person in an economic position. [laughter] But also understand that, by doing something like a PhD in philosophy, you're doing a labor of love that you wouldn't do for any other reason than that you have to. That's the only reason anyone ever does philosophy now. That's the best reason for doing philosophy—because you really want to think about this thing.

"there's no joy in doing philosophy unless you [really love it]. But if you have that feeling, never compromise"

So, if you do it, don't look back. [laughter] Don't regret all the money you didn't make. Just enjoy all the concepts that you will get to savor. That's my advice to would-be philosophy students. Do it if you are madly in love with it. Otherwise, don't.

What I enjoy the most is having really excited students. That's the greatest thrill that a philosopher ever gets: not writing alone in a dark room but exciting people, especially young people, with a fire for ideas that doesn't come very easily. So, the fact that I'm talking to a bunch of undergraduates right now makes me totally thrilled.

***Stance* (EW): Thank you so much. I think we're at the end of our time. But I want to thank you again for speaking with us today. Your answers were wonderful, and you gave us a lot to think about, and we're very excited to include your interview in our journal.**

EG: And thanks so much for asking me. I really enjoyed it, scared as I was to begin with.