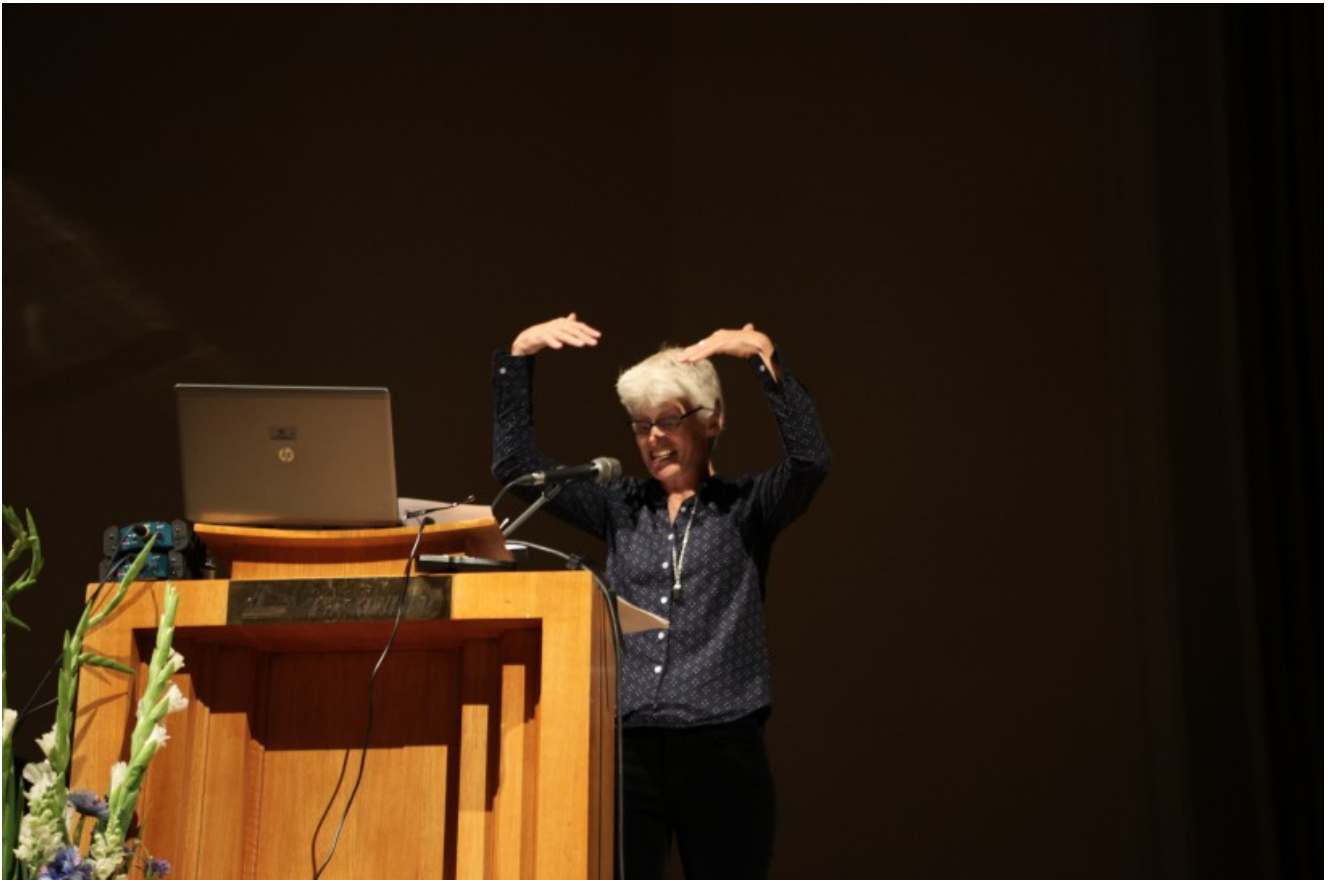




Persistent Point of First Contact - Povinelli & EASA2014

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Earlier this week, Allegra published a [critique of Elizabeth Povinelli's keynote](#) at the EASA 2014 in Tallinn written by [Sylvain Piron](#). It did not take long for the controversy to flair up in the social media as 'pro-Povinellians' flew to the rescue of the academic star, denouncing the unfairness of Piron's harsh judgement. Some elements of Piron's arguments were certainly 'raw' and lacked subtlety. Yet his post also addressed points that need further dissecting - and it certainly can be acclaimed for triggering discussion.



As the moderators of an academic blog, we feel that one of our primary responsibilities is to facilitate debates. To us this duty becomes particularly grave when the future of our discipline is concerned. This angle concretizes the wider context for Povinelli's talk - a context that we feel has so far remained largely unarticulated. Subsequently we want to offer some critical reflections of our own.

One recurring theme in the critique toward Piron's analysis has become his focus on Povinelli's gesturing and body language, with some commentators even suggesting that similar observations would never be written - let alone published - in case of male scholars. Yes, Piron's observations were detailed, intrusive - certainly intimate, to echo one of the slogan's for the Tallinn Conference - but we do not want to dismiss of them that easily.

For Povinelli's persona embodied, or more accurately perhaps, *should have embodied*, a sense of invigoration, inspiration - *the future* - of the discipline that we are jointly so passionate about. This was, at least, our reading of the collective mood that characterized this first joint gathering of all the anthropologists who had travelled far and wide - after an interval of two years since the last



Conference of the most important professional association of European anthropologists - to eventually find themselves in the magnificent Tallinn Concert Hall.

Expectations ran high - not just toward Povinelli's speech but for the Conference in general. We all know that times are dark, and let's not even get started on the absurdity of ongoing university managerial reforms! Perhaps with this Conference we were *finally* on our way toward collective exhilaration and (renewed?) societal relevance for our arduous professional endeavours.

Against this background Povinelli simply got off on the wrong foot. Even if intended as humorous or ironic, the audience never seemed to forgive her for her opening comment of 'not really wanting to be there'. And yes, we wonder too: if she didn't want to come, why did she - or why did she share her hesitation?

Add to this remark issues of European inferiority / American superiority complexes that [we briefed at in our preliminary remarks](#) of the talk, and one grasps far better why from thereon her talk sort of fell on a 'hostile crowd'.

This context explains, perhaps, part of the intensity that her talk awakened. Here we need to be truthful. As much as it pains us to dwell on such collective dismay, we would not be accurate if we did not repeat, again: people *really* did not like her talk. We could continue here with varying degrees of upset and bodily expression of dissatisfaction that we encountered, but we feel that this message has become sufficiently clear even in their absence.



However, this dislike was ultimately not caused by her body language or symbolic embodiments of 'hope', but because of the talk's content.

What was the fundamental problem? To us, quite bluntly, instead of helping our beloved discipline to break free from a European/North-American legacy that has tended to exoticize the 'other' and make him/her become the silent object of the anthropological gaze and Western knowledge consumption, it resonated, even strengthened this troubling legacy.

First there were Povinelli's persistent reminders of her close intimacy with the natives - the use of the pronoun 'we' as if wanting to secure her legitimate position for representing the world of the indigenous groups she studied. "We eat together. We raise kids together. We make films together". Was she emphasizing that it is extraordinary for an anthropologist to share the everyday activities of her informants?



This question grew more intense as her talk continued, and the ‘other’ made her appearance via her disappearance, sort of. For – even if her projects entertain a more nuanced reality – in her talk the ‘native’s point of view’ never really became a part of the equation.

Instead, we were bombarded by Deleuze’s and Guattari’s abstract notions of intersection and assemblages alongside anthropological buzzwords with virtually no ethnographic grounding. As her talk continued, the geontologies she initially intended to make visible vanished into the ‘black boxes’ of NTIC and mediated communication.

Once again, perhaps because of the ‘wrong foot’ with which things got started, we along with so many of our colleagues left the Concert Hall with a bitter sense of



déjà-vu. Further, we found ourselves having nagging doubts toward the EASA Scientific Committee: they could not have invited Povinelli as the keynote speaker *precisely* because of how her work resonates with colonial superiority complexes...

We all know the following, but in the spirit of doing things properly, let's go back to the basics. Since Malinowski, the core method of our discipline has been participant observation, a method that (ideally) offers us access to the moral universes and cosmologies of those whom we observe via participating. We are all familiar with conceptualizations of 'the exotic other' as well as problems thereof.

Yet, we feel that we need to ask once again: just what is 'the exotic' that we study collectively as anthropologists? Something identifiable visibly - marked by colourful 'tribal' attire or at minimum, differing racial identifiers - or something less conspicuous and evident, yet simultaneously far more profound? What precisely does 'the exotic' mean in our analytical equation? It is to this question that we feel that Povinelli's choice as a keynote offered a disappointingly familiar, even mundane response.

For us this is the fundamental issue at stake that should become also the focal point in regards to Povinelli's talk and the EASA's advisory board in inviting her as the keynote speaker. This discussion resonates with the hordes of anthropologists who have concretely moved away from the remote and the exotic, conducting fieldwork instead 'at home', in settings where 'radical difference' cannot be found but rather 'radical sameness' often prevails.



To us, it is as much on the discovery of radical sameness as it is in difference where the truly 'exotic' lies.

In addition, globalisation has blurred the divide between 'us' and 'them', forcing us to think anew the methodological foundations of our discipline and to devise new forms of collaboration. A radical critical anthropology, in our view, implies developing new forms of research collaborations where lateral reason can be stimulated.

As Ghassan Hage argues, anthropology remains 'a permanent point of first contact' where it becomes possible to see the 'weird' both at our doorstep and further afield.

All of these realizations were, in our view, absent from Povinelli's account of the Karabing. Despite of the presence of visual 'exotism', absent was a sense of the 'weird' or new as everything felt familiar. Perhaps unexpectedly, this sentiment was strengthened rather than alleviated by the element of her talk that, undoubtedly, *did* address something factually new: the technologies that were cardinal in her project.

To us her talk conveyed a notion of collaboration that was marked by an absence of critical engagement with the unintended effects of new technologies in mediating representations of indigenous people's life world. As one of our colleagues pointed out as we discussed the talk on the same evening:



“Instead of learning from indigenous people how geography and biography are weaved together to produce their unique social imagination, she seemed to blindly trust the new media technologies’ capacity to embed without altering traditional, historical and contemporary knowledge back into the landscape from which it came ».

That indigenous knowledge became a sort of virtual artefact to be displayed in an online museum directly available for consumption did not seem to represent a major ethical problem, since the indigenous people themselves were eager to take part of the experiment. The alteration Povinelli advocated for turned out to apply not to the anthropologist but rather to the already disempowered people she purported to assist in their claims for the recognition of their land.

This brings us back to the main reason of our discomfort we briefly mentioned earlier: namely, the fact that Europe has a long enough history of plunder of other



cultures' material and immaterial heritage to awaken suspicion when similar projects are being reactivated under the disguise of new technologies and post-structuralist justifications.

We want to conclude our discussion - and simultaneously this entire chapter of our EASA 2014 project - by sharing our hesitation in writing this post. Yes, Elizabeth Povinelli's achievements are vast and her career is so impressive that she likely has the kind of 'scholarly armour' to take the critique. This is further likely not the first or worst time that she hears zinging remarks on her work.

But there is still something about the might of the written word, alongside with the immediacy of the online world, which makes us hesitant. There simply is an 'iffy' feeling about spilling all this virtual ink over the talk of one single scholar.

What about the perspective of us, the authors of this post? Would we be wiser if we continued to ponder over these views for a bit longer before sharing them in public - certainly it would feel safer to hide behind layers of peer review and the watering-down effect of time.

But are we not addressing here precisely the collective sentiment that contributes to a certain stagnation of our beloved discipline - hence also stripping us of the more general possibility to participate in ongoing societal discussions happening right now?

Is it thus not better that we take a leap of faith and risk something (our



reputation?) by actually saying something? Yes, gossip and innuendo have always been inseparable elements of scholarly work, as a wise mentor reminded us as we balanced the best course of action in the case at hand. Would it be better if all of the above was *left* as just that, or is the possibility to share them with our scholarly community to the benefit of us all?

We know not for certain, but we are persuaded of this: it is both urgent and rewarding to keep addressing these questions & navigating this border to the unknown.

It is in this spirit that we conclude our coverage of this chapter of EASA 2014 and warmly invite you all to join us next week as we celebrate Allie turning 1!

