

## Obituary: Gillian O. Howie, 1965–2013

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**Abstract** The present special issue of *Sophia* on ‘feminist philosophy of religion’ is dedicated to Gillian O. Howie who died in 2013. This essay is a short obituary touching on Howie’s philosophical and personal legacy. The intention is to give a brief overview of Howie as a courageous woman with boundless intellectual curiosity and passionate commitments to feminist activities; these include writing and living her philosophical vision for creating a just society with collective political action. Howie inspired both women and men in philosophy—especially, but not only, feminist philosophers of religion—with her work on the critical role of sexual difference in life today.

**Keywords** Collective action · Deleuze · Divine · Dying · Feminism · Irigaray · Living · Materialism · Personal · Philosophical · Political

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.  
T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, *Four Quartets*

As a bereaved friend and colleague, J’annine Jobling captures the heart of Gillian O. Howie’s life and work in asserting ‘the personal is the philosophical’ (*Radical Philosophy*, 180, July/August 2013). Howie philosophized about life, including the personal in ‘living with dying’ (<http://newthinkingaboutlivingwithdying.wordpress.com/2012/06/28/death-you-cant-live-with-it-you-cant-livewithout-it/>) (June 28, 2012). Howie died at the age of 47, after 7 years of living with cancer. At the time of her death, Howie was the Head of the Philosophy Department, University of Liverpool, and the first female professor of philosophy at Liverpool.

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Gillian O. Howie was born in 1965, Kingston upon Thames. She studied for her first degree at Exeter University; and she completed her doctorate in Philosophy at Jesus College, Cambridge, where she also served on the executive committees of Cambridge Labour Students and Cambridge University Students' Union. Later, Howie served on the national executive committees of the Association of University Teachers (AUT), the British Philosophical Association (BPA), and the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP). She was also Director of the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research.

In 1995, Howie started work in the Philosophy Department at the University of Liverpool, where she also met and married Simon Hughes: they had two sons, Alfie and Henry. Her family, friends, colleagues, and students were bereaved of a loving mother, inspiring teacher, committed social and political activist. Her personal commitments are evident in her philosophical work. As Jobling informs us, 'even in the most theoretical of her writings, her underlying concern lay with praxis-related questions revolving around the politics of justice.' Howie's first major publication is *Deleuze and Spinoza: Aura of Expressionism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Arguing that Deleuze's philosophical commentary on Spinoza provides the foundations for his own later metaphysical speculations regarding the body, power, singularities and difference, Howie makes the contentious and ambitious claim that Deleuze's arguments lead to eliminativism, a Hobbesian politics, and mystification. Later in her feminist writings, Howie is clearly suspicious of Deleuze's philosophical model of 'becoming woman'; she is not convinced by the Deleuzian transformation of embodied nature due to its alignment with schizo-processes and the philosophical loss of things being mind-independent; as a result, sexual difference remains hidden.

Howie's wide-ranging and long-standing activities in the field of feminism gave a crucial role to sexual difference and related politics. One feminist philosophy conference, which Howie co-organised with J'annine Jobling, stands out for its relevance to this special issue of *Sophia*: the 'Women and the Divine' conference held in Liverpool in 2005 had the sexual-difference feminist, Luce Irigaray as its keynote speaker. The huge impact of this event on women's relation to the divine, spanning 5 days, with more than 100 papers presented by delegates from all over the world, put feminist philosophy of religion on the map in Liverpool and beyond. In a strategy typical of her integrative approach to all academic pursuits, Howie extended that conference programme beyond the presentation of papers, to include a local, grassroots interfaith forum, yoga, shiatsu, jazz, and poetry recital. Again, as her co-organiser, Jobling reported after this event, 'it was both pleasure and privilege to collaborate with Howie, who was the very model of grace under pressure (except, that is, when the rising bollard in the conference car park rose into the under-carriage of her car on the last day).' She co-edited, with J'annine Jobling, *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), a selection of feminist philosophy essays from the 2005 conference.

In addition, Howie's feminist research activities reached to the internationally and critically significant publication, *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, edited by Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Mumford (Palgrave, 2007). Here, Howie co-authored with Ashley Tauchert a chapter, 'Feminist Dissonance: The Logic of Late Feminism,' which focused on the more recent shifts in feminist self-consciousness and practice; and this work demonstrates a new wave of historical and theoretical problems. In particular, Howie and Tauchert insist that third wave feminism confront an unresolved tension between its indirect epistemological anti-realism and the earlier second-

wave materialist analysis of socio-economic conditions. In this work, Howie brings the cultural insights of third wave feminism into the ‘aesthetic and affective manifestations of subject identity’; in fact, this sees Howie returning to materialist feminism, which would be revised and updated to take account of global capital.

Her critical exploration of third-wave feminism is carried over into Howie’s next co-edited project with the prominent American feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff in a new series of volumes, entitled ‘Breaking Feminist Waves,’ published by Palgrave Macmillan. The aim of this series was to encourage original contributors from feminist philosophers who think theoretically and creatively about feminism’s history and future. This project with Alcoff has become a groundbreaking series of publications reflecting Howie’s commitment to feminist materialism, which was beautifully presented in her own monograph for the series, *Between Feminism and Materialism: A Question of Method* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). With this last publication, Howie showed that ‘something politically relevant follows from the way we think about subjects, objects and their mediation’ (p. xi). In this fine piece of feminist philosophy, Howie gives recognition to the multiplicity of speaking locations, the polyvalent causes of oppression, and to the dangers of universalization, while asking how collective goal-oriented action is possible: ‘what systematic changes would be required to create a just society?’

Howie contributed to the philosophy of education, publishing *Gender, Teaching and Research in Higher Education* (co-edited with Ashley Tauchert; Ashgate, 2002) and a special edition of the journal, *Critical Quarterly* entitled ‘Universities in the UK: Drowning by Numbers’ (Spring/Summer, 2005). She served on the editorial board of *Journal of Further and Higher Education* (2005–2008). Her intellectual curiosity was boundless; and she continued to engage in debate and critical dialogue from her hospice bed. The scope and productivity of her research activities were seemingly without limits.

Howie was clearly a courageous woman, a passionate thinker, an excellent co-worker, and a philosopher who bridged the divides between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy, feminism and materialism, critical theory, and existential phenomenology. She wrote on Spinoza, Karl Marx, Jean Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze, feminist and materialist philosophies. Speaking at her funeral in Liverpool, Simon Hailwood captures Howie’s magnificent charm in saying, ‘Gill was a very fine and extraordinary person: she was brilliant, sensitive, humorous, kind and, to her friends and colleagues, an utterly loyal and reliable source of immense support and inspiration.’ Howie left a significant philosophical and personal legacy; this includes the students and philosophers who were inspired by her, and the family and friends who were dearly loved by her.