



Trailblazer  
Interview:  
Elizabeth  
Cooper &  
Queer Body  
Love

[GraceQuantock.com](http://GraceQuantock.com)

**Grace:** Hi, this is Grace Quantock and this is a Trailblazers interview. Today we are speaking with Elizabeth Cooper.

She is a coach, artist, guide and queer performance artist. She holds a vision with us of feeling alive and free in our bodies.

She has a BA in anthropology, gender and sexuality studies and performance from Princeton, and has studied coaching, yoga training at Kripalu and has explored her own personal journey with healing too.

So Elizabeth thank you for joining us today

**Elizabeth:** Thank you so much for having me

**Grace:** Oh, I just want to say she's the founder of Queer Body Love. Where will people find that online?

**Elizabeth:** At ElizabethJCooper.com or if you google Queer Body Love it comes up

**Grace:** So, um, thank you for joining us. To begin can you speak a little bit to what queerness means to you at the moment and how you came to this work?

**Elizabeth:** Big question, awesome, love it. And how I came to the work? [Laughs].

So yeah, I feel like queerness... just thinking about queerness lights my face up I feel really excited about my own path and identification with it and it's definitely what brought me to the particular intersection.

I work with people on particularly around food and body image and healing our disconnection from our bodies because a disconnection from my body came as a result of feeling alienated from my sexuality in high school.

I came from Japan to Brazil right at the time I was discovering, I was thinking gayness was most accessible to me and I focussed...because I felt not accepted and alienated I focussed on the things that society was telling me would help me feel "better" and so loosing weight, being a good student, performing like what I felt a "good girl" was.

And this wasn't all logical, at the time I really didn't understand what I was doing or the relationship with sexuality with also my coping mechanism with dealing with that disconnection.

So that was the wound that led to the healing path that led to so much joy and now thinking about queerness, I'm just, I'm smiling. It's a sexual orientation but its political and it connects me with a lineage of people who have resisted and have focussed on being in their bodies, community and

pleasure when there's been huge risk.

I have not personally experienced such risk as my queer ancestors, transcestors who have made it possible for me to be living out as a queer women in San Francisco in a queer home. And I know that's not the case for everyone all over the world living in different places.

And yeah for me it's about possibility, imagining new ways of being with our bodies and with pleasure and with community and focusses on consent. And there's so many values and principals I've found from being in queer communist that feel alive and exciting to me and I think can be an asset we can choose resilience and we can choose resistance and resilience.

We can't control everything outside ourselves and there's lots of marginalisation on our bodies. And particularly if you live at different intersections of oppression then that impacts you differently and we have a choice of how we relate to it. So I think to me it feels really nourishing to think of people who have fought and are fighting for bodily autonomy and living in our bodies and with each other in the way we want to.

**Grace:** I love your answer, how rich it is - there's so much there. I feel so much resonates with my own experience and where I'm working. I imagine so

many people listening watching will resonate with the experience of being othered or marginised in some way and then homing in on the aspects of ourselves that are "acceptable". Which is seen as something which can fit in, a way in which can protect us from the loneliness, the struggle, the pain and risk that the othering can cause.

I love the approach of resistance and resilience. I'm really interested in intersections to queering, otherness, disability and your approach to body love and how it synchs in. And how it connects around that.

**Elizabeth:** Totally and I'm still learning and when I started Queer Body Love two and a half years ago I knew the world is messed up and I'd been on a healing process.

And I wanted to shake people to help them see the larger constructs which were then being filtered through stories and actions in a way that people were harming themselves.

But yes, there are those influences and you have a choice about how you relate to them. Specifically around dieting and that can really disconnect ourselves from ourselves and our bodies and is not based in fact. And you can read about health at every size for more of the science about that.

And what I felt really passionate about is fat liberation and that fat is not bad. Not bad, not lazy or all of the attributes culture puts on it.

That was the genesis on my healing journey, reclaiming my body from outside forces.

I knew I wanted to work with that and with queer people because I was like, those are my people.

I've been learning so much about ability, disability, gender. Because I am cis gendered - I'm not transgender and I started working with queer women and then non-binary folks and transgendered and widened the scope of people I work with and learn from the people I work with and interview for my speaker series.

I will share one example of a time I messed up and this is in my lived identify how I'm approaching body love and how it's changing being in community with transfolks particularly.

At the beginning of my business, maybe 6 months in I made this meme, (and it was on Labour day which we have in U.S), I said 'what if we put all energy we put into hating our bodies into loving them instead?'

And it's a pretty typical body positive message - 'let's shift from controlling to loving'. Does that make sense?

And the nuance not captured and transfolks can feel othered as I do actually want to change something in my body to feel more in alignment with who I am and that's real. And that's different from fat phobia.

And they can intersect it can be challenging to parse out. Is this dismorphia or fat phobia but they are separate different things.

Learning from people and everyone's journey is different, I think number one, that's the most important thing I want to say about body love... Who you are in your lived experience in your body, you are the expert of that, I'm not, nobody is.

You can get advice and opinions but it's ultimately your choice, it's where I've come to and where I am now it's about agency and choice.

It's about knowing these are the ways I'm thinking about myself then from these stories I am telling myself come the thoughts and actions and my life how I feel.

Any point in that path of how we are creating our reality we can interrupt it and shift it and we get to choose that no one else. That's the queerness part, resistance, choice, autonomy in how you want to relate to your body.

And knowing we can't control everything. In high school, I was struggling and I love Indie Arie, I listened to it again and again - the serenity prayer. "Give me the courage to change I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can't change and the wisdom to know the difference".

So there's always things from outside ourselves we can't change and things we can. Getting clear on what those are and knowing you are not completely victim to your circumstances and things outside will affect you and knowing there's room for that as well.

I don't know as much about disability but I imagine it's there are similar themes in there, do you have thoughts on that?

**Grace:** Yes, it's very, very strong - the ways in which the outside things impact us and invisible systems all around us impact us.

I guess I put a little question mark over the idea that we can choose our thoughts as that's not been my experience. And in working with people that they can choose their thoughts because maybe people have variations on mental illness, anxiety, intrusive thoughts, depression, psychosis. And the idea of choosing thoughts might not be so available.

And this is such a nuanced place because it's that



place where there's something around recognising the systems which impact us the oppressions the perpetrate and I'm really with at the moment how hard that recognition is, that's tough.

I often work with people where the idea is that if we locate the problem in ourselves then we have the hope of one day fixing it.

[Hold on, I've got to plug in my computer battery - it's not charging, which is interesting and makes me reflect on resourcing. Ok]

So say someone was very small and something painful happened and maybe they had the ability to think 'it's my fault and therefore I'm going to change something in me and the bad thing won't happen again'.

**Elizabeth:** Right

**Grace:** And it's not their fault but the thought gives them a feeling of control in a very very difficult world.

Another thought is that 'it's not my fault and I live in a world in which bad things sometimes happen and I struggle to protect myself against them'. It's a thought that many younger humans, children, infants would struggle with that thought.

I think many of us and the younger humans in us as adults would struggle with that thought too.

So when we step outside the systems, (it's terrifying within them), outside them we don't even have the protection of trying to be 'good' any more even if the trying to be good is really damaging us.

So I love the idea of resilience and resistance as I feel sometimes it's pot rayed as we are "awake" or "asleep" and you know I think it's really hard to be awake all the time.

**Elizabeth:** Totally

**Grace:** So there's something, I guess that's where I am, how does that land with you?

**Elizabeth:** Well, I'm really glad you pointed out the ableism inherent in what I was saying about choosing your thoughts. And that's the kind of nuanced conversation I want about agency and surrender it feels like you are talking about somewhat.

What's a moment or a place I can...I don't really like the world control...that I can choose. What's a place where I can ask for support in a particular way or choose how we relate to our thoughts?

As a side note I don't believe we can change our

thoughts completely. People see meditation, 'I'm just going to sit and have no thoughts completely'.

It's changing the relationship to the thoughts.

Meditation informs a lot of how I work. Those thoughts are going to keep running, some of those thoughts are very deeply embedded.

I think community can be really key to that softening, that's the word that's been coming up for me recently around the struggle. And thoughts coming up, how can be with ourselves with those thoughts that are intrusive or repetitive. We don't want those thoughts and then we start to think those thoughts are us and they are not you.

I went in a lot of different directions there...

**Grace:** I think it's good and what you brought up about meditation is really key that when... I think there's a microcosm there, we are told to not think - it's a synonym for how we are in the world, we are trying to stop something which is it's a natural, biological part. We have thoughts and then we feel we've failed. Another thing we've failed at. And everything starts to add up.

I love on your website you say "I believe we need to heal as individuals and collectively from the ways in which our past and systems of oppression have hurt

us.

I believe you and your body are worthy of love and respect.

I believe you are not broken for having shame about yourself and/or your body.

I believe it's not your fault.

I believe it's possible to heal.

I believe we can do it together."

**Elizabeth:** I love hearing those again, I wrote them so long ago! I really do believe those things.

**Grace:** They do resonate, don't they? And that's how I came towards your work, resonating with these practices and resisting the sources that tells... resisting all the sources telling us that our pain is our fault, or that we 'shouldn't' be feeling disempowered, dissociated and disembodied.

These are difficult, painful things to experience but sharing that these are natural responses to what we have survived in this difficult world or in a society that perpetrates these assaults upon people who are othered or marginalised in some way.

I love how you say that healing happens in community because so often we are told healing

happens us that healing happens individually by handing our power over to an "expert". And that's where I drew towards your work and the experience with SOFTEN. Can you introduce SOFTEN for those who don't know about it?

**Elizabeth:** Yes, I held my first public virtual retreat for queer body love retreat a few months ago that Grace came to, called SOFTEN.

And just the impact of that word, the energetic impact of soften a lot of us are needing now in the world there's a lot of fear and hardening and wanting control and I think together we can soften our nervous system and way we are being with ourselves and from that place through that create new possibilities.

The virtual retreat was focussed on creating a daily ritual to do for the month of October with the idea that can be this microcosm practicing being in action around how you want to feel and be with your body. Coming back to theme of agency and choice and begin in action in shifting the way you feel around yourself.

**Grace:** And it was fantastic and I really appreciated how much underpinning structure that was in the space. And my practice, those who have read my book *Beyond the Boundaries: Finding Freedom and Fulfilment Within Four Walls: Self-Care Edition* will

know this, I historically would pick up/create/adapt a practice and say, "right I am going to relax as hard as I can! I will be the best at relaxing, to heal!"

**Elizabeth:** How exhausting!

**Grace:** How exhausting!

So I loved the practice of softening and doing it for one month, it was a revelation for me

**Elizabeth:** How was your practice for the month?

**Grace:** It was amazing and it had more impact than I anticipated. I am sure many people reading/listening/watching along may resonate with idea when we buy into things which promise the world...And you get an extra free thing if you buy today.

It is a lot of stuff coming at us and they do something, but they don't generally make us 'slim, cellulite free, making 6-figures in our beach house and whatever the new thing is I haven't followed'.

But there can be this little feeling of failure and the idea that the person who made it is living like that and I should be.

**Elizabeth:** What did you anticipate and what did you find?

**Grace:** I think I anticipated queerness and body love coming together, and I found... I did a practice of daily belly massage, which because of my illness and impairments has historically been a place of pain and difficulty. I was very interested in how the practice shifted my relationship to my body in that month in a beautiful way.

And as we close on that note - and the practice took 5 minutes, so small but powerful. Is there anything a listener/reader/watcher could do now to begin to take our conversation into action and incorporate Queer Body Love into their lives?

**Elizabeth:** I also want to say I believe the practice was powerful to you because of the community and intention and frame around it.

Like, I could have told you via email, saying 'Ok do 5 minutes of body massage a day for a month'. And you might be 'uh, ok' or do it for a few days or the month but it wouldn't have the personal intention behind it. That's why I struggle thinking of one action.

I think you already know.

Think of what is the most joyful and smallest thing that you want to do to develop a more loving connection with yourself.

One of my speakers in my speaker series Sam Dylan Finch talked about loving gestures with our bodies. Even when we aren't feeling loving towards it, what's something loving we can do? And not making a really big deal out of it or make it be 'the thing that's going to change your life' but being open to the possibility that it might. Containing it in a month and approaching it was an experiment can be really helpful. Hold on, I got distracted....

Action, intention, experiment - 3 components

1. Intention: for how you want to feel and be in relation to your body, what does Queer Body Love mean to you?

Maybe queerness is/isn't important, what does body love mean to you?

2. Then choosing an action that feels easeful and joyful.

3. Having it be an experiment with some sort of containment and structure so you don't feel you have to be doing this for the rest of your life and it feels more manageable.

I think treating everyone in life like an experiment can be helpful, if this is your relationship with experimentation it can create sense of openness and



curiosity, 'mmh I'm trying this I wonder what will happen?'"

A bit of humility as opposed to think some other expert (or yourself) will know what the results can be. We never quite know.

Trying it on for a specific amount of time like the next week. For example I really love showers and I notice I haven't been taking them as much.

Or (this comes from lots of body love people), feeling the water on your skin, focussing on one time or day or action feeling your body when it feels pleasurable.

I'm going to choose this action of showering every day not every other day (short showers, to save water) and I'm going to feel the water on my skin and orient towards pleasure.

And try that for one week and see whether I want to keep doing it, how it impacts me or not and continue to adjust.

And I think it can be so, so, so helpful I can't emphasize enough how helpful I think it is to be in relationship to other people in some way shape or form, a coach, a therapist, a friend, partner, someone online that there's some shared holding or it someone you can talk to about it.

For me that's so helpful so you aren't alone feeling you have to do it alone, or as you said easier we feel we have to heal alone and get to some 'healed place' before we share or get to be with other people and we are always all on our healing journeys and I think there's lots of power in sharing or connecting from that place.

**Grace:** Totally and as I go on in my life, the more I believe so much of it is about relationship and how we accompany each other on this journey. I trace it back to where the individualism in our cultures began and how painful its been and how we can address that as often people struggle to connect and think they are doing something wrong by needing help. And I think gosh we all need people, human or non-human animals the numinous

**Elizabeth:** Totally, yes

**Grace:** I really love this small, kindly action. I'm just going to add I know for many people bathing and showering can be very difficult. I'm just trying to transmit a visceral alternative like the texture of a blanket, or the sound if that's possible or a scent.

And you know I have a day bed in my studio where we are now. And I see it's got textures, a ruffled/lined texture and a velvet blanket and one that's kind of silky blanket.

**Elizabeth:** Oh I love that!

**Grace:** And I don't have sensation all over my body, so there are parts that can't feel those textures but there are parts that can and they are colours, different purples and blues that I enjoy and I offer that as a possibility there.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, awakening our senses in whatever way we can, it doesn't always have to be physical and feeling. Like sight of smell, I just recorded a mini-meditation yesterday in finding pleasure in sight. And I have a lot of things like that on my website and Queer Body Love Facebook group if folks are interested in having more guidance and suggestions in those things.

**Grace:** And I will link that and all your wonderful social media and website and everything and that's where people can go to find out more about your work.

**Elizabeth:** Awesome yeah I have a lot in the works right now, I'm going to do another SOFTEN virtual retreat and group program and meditations and I have one on one coaching practice also. At least right now I have some openings so feel free to get in touch whatever support you need.

**Grace:** Great, now I have a new ending, what's

your favourite book right now? I have to say right now or we'll be here forever.

**Elizabeth:** I've been reading lately and people in my circles reading: *Emergent Strategies*, I have it right there I feel I should go grab it and show you. Have you read it?

**Grace:** I haven't!

**Elizabeth:** Lots of people have told me it's me.

**Grace:** I will check it out and I'm sure others too. Who's the historical person inspiring you at the moment?

**Elizabeth:** I've been wanting to read more historical things I've been influenced by people and I don't know their full stories, I've been inspired by bell hooks, Andre Lorde, Adrienne Rich. Andre Lorde's writing has been influenced me lately. I don't know enough about her, I;m learning more about history of people who have paved the way for ideas and types of spaces I am interested in creating.

**Grace:** Who should we be following online that we aren't already?

**Elizabeth:** Oh, so many people! Basically everyone who has been in my 2 speaker series, so that's 45 people!

**Grace:** I can link to your series we can all go and follow them.

**Elizabeth:** There's 14 queer and trans leaders from this last year. That's also something I want to develop more on my website too resources to amazing people there are a lot of them. Speaker series is great place to start.

**Grace:** Thank you so much for your generosity in sharing your time and energy, ideas and magic with us today.

**Elizabeth:** thank you so much for having me.

**Grace:** Thank you so much for everyone who has read, listened and watched I really appreciate your time and choosing to spend it here with us. I will be back soon with more Trailblazer interviews. In the mean time you should be able to comment below in the post and let us know if you have any questions. And we are sending you lots of love and good things, thank you for being you and keep trailblazing!

**Elizabeth:** Bye.