

Robyn Maree Pickens

IT CAN BE DIFFICULT to escape the sense of oneself as an individual, discrete bundle of subjectivity encased in skin. I take up space. I am allocated seat 23E, not 26E, so I must move. I inscribe my initials on school property, a cave wall. The mass email is personalised, *Dear Robyn*, as if I were the only recipient. If I were shot, chalk would temporarily register the form of my removed body. To list the everyday incidences of my substantiation as an individual, bounded subject would be a vast project.

I must maintain my individual self. It is a fulltime job, but not one with an official position description or direct remuneration. I must constantly verify my subject-hood: keep about my person cards and documents with numbers that confirm my status: as a New Zealander, a Class 1 driver, a student. On digital platforms I enter more numbers, passwords, identify hills or cars from a bank of images. I am Real Me.

I take it further. On social media platforms there is a blank template. Few people choose to remain the egg icon on Twitter: yet to hatch, yet to be born, without name, handle, profile picture, background image. I join to connect, to know what's going on, to access opportunities, to support others, to share, to network, to provide a link to my low-fi website. The corporation has provided a blank template and I am encouraged to personalise it, to elaborate the bare bones, to present a version of myself. I oblige the corporation. I oblige my maintenance of self. I acquiesce to the invitation to represent myself. I acquiesce to the commodification of myself.

This commodification of self via digitally networked platforms is not to suggest there is another type of off-grid self who is somehow pure or uncontaminated, but social-media platforms have nevertheless considerably proliferated the presentation of self, and exacerbated the subject's vulnerability to commodification. In this context of neoliberal capitalism and the commodity fetish, what are the politics of individually bounded selfhood and identity? Can identity be divested from capitalist commodification? Or more interestingly, can subjects divest from identity? That is, can we divest the idea – everywhere enforced into legitimacy – that we, that 'I' am an individual subject? That I am contained? That I am my own micro-constellation? That the project of individual subjectivity is worthwhile, useful, political?

For marginalised groups any diminishment of the identity horizon is problematic. Why should we/they be denied, or deny ourselves/themselves the potential opportunity of self-definition and self-representation? Perhaps the onus is therefore on privileged subjects to voluntarily relinquish the proliferation of their subjectivity. Such a qualitative discussion of subjectivity seems to suggest that it is

in fact real. Of course it is to a point: constructions of identity (ideology, stereotypes) shape and bring into being physical consequences. And/or, to invoke the chicken and egg conundrum, institutions foster and structure inequality. This sequence prompts the consideration of another conundrum.

Some of us grew up with the trickle down idea that there is no outside to capitalism. That it reaches in to every particle of life and expression: that there is nothing that cannot be recuperated back into the commodification machine. Which is such a bleak conception of life that it makes one (or many) want to go and saw their arm off. But it is necessary to evoke this nihilist streak in any discussion of subjectivity and identity. Because if, as I have suggested, identity is prone to commodification under neoliberal capitalism, we need to interrogate the extent to which capitalist recuperation is true. This process is akin to an investigative skin that is important to at least partially work through or slough off before thinking about possible alternatives to the idea of the individually bounded self.

THE TRICKLE DOWN IDEA that there is no outside to capitalism because every expression of protest against 'the system' will be repackaged five months later to advertise edgy fashion or leisure activities is such a brilliant stymie of action it's almost as if the Right thought it up. Capitalist repackaging of dissent into commodity does of course take place. But it cannot capture the spirit of the original action, and the originators do not need to partake of the repackaged commodity. Some selective tuning out may be required. And the repackaging is only successful if people choose to be seduced into buying the fetishized product or experience. As we have heard multiple times, capitalism depends on our complicity. So we find value elsewhere: better yet, we create it.

The 'no outside' to capitalism creed perpetuates the status quo. It promotes the indie cool repertoire of limited emotional states: ennui, lethargy, irony, and excessive cynicism. The latter two are useful in small quantities but not as dominant modes of being.

So if there is an outside to capitalism, and to the commodification of self and experience, how does identity figure now? Firstly a caveat or two: capitalism has hunger issues, and it involves most of us to varying extents. Capitalism depends on markets, but capitalism is not a sovereign entity on autopilot: capitalism is us. The financier, the investor, the advertising company are but clear-cut protagonists who restlessly create markets for new products or experiences. In time, if not already, there

will most likely be a product range for your identity. Don't get me wrong there is something not only seductive and practical in finding an online store that specialises in tomboy and butch clothing, but the onus is on me to resist the shoring up of subjectivity cache by aligning, enlarging or hyper-defining myself through purchasing tomboy chic.

Yes to supporting small, ethical and fair-trade businesses, no to a superficial hyper-definition of myself. When I invest energy in the substantiation of myself as an individually bounded subject, I not only increase my vulnerability to self-commodification with concomitant investment in capitalist values, but I actively take part in what is essentially a reification of self. I build up my self, I reify self at the expense of all the production and energy (read fossil fuels) embedded in the object and the environment, and my focus on self-curation could be detrimental to forming relational ties and subjectivities with others.

Many thinkers have helped me imagine new configurations of subject-hood, subjectivity, and identity including Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Stacy Alaimo. Common to each thinker is the idea (the reality) that we are composed of many entities, constituted and sustained by the biogeochemical cycles that enable all life, and that we affect other ecologies (to which we are linked). The other key idea common to all three thinkers is a rejection of human exceptionalism. We, the human we, are not the most important ecology. Yet a particularly Western conception of human exceptionalism, which has already triggered the Sixth Mass Extinction, cannot (even if it were possible) decentre humankind *without* taking responsibility for the destruction and extinction of other ecologies. That is, the project of decentring humankind as the most important species must *simultaneously* shoulder responsibility for the damage we/they have done.

In the context of the Anthropocene and the Sixth Mass Extinction, the maintenance of the self as an individually bounded, identity-fixated subject can appear to be of less importance. It is romantic, even hedonistic however to imagine that individuals could conceive of themselves as a bundle of flesh held together with bacteria, grown by the earth, breathing because of trees. That we are ultimately compost. That one of our projects could be how to make of ourselves the healthiest future compost. The increase of green burials without formaldehyde in biodegradable coffins, or no covering, suggests that the impact of our dead bodies on the earth is already under consideration.

ONE OF MY FAVOURITE SENTENCES in

Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* is: 'We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman'.¹ My hands have been in soil, planted seeds, crumbled worm's rich tailings enough times to know that ultimately I am humus. As humus I am we. I/we are made from the same matter, we depend

on the quality of the soil and water for 'multispecies flourishing'.² 'I' am one of many species, many ecologies. I am not the most important, but I am responsible (though not alone) for the destruction of the lifeworlds of other ecologies (of which I am also a part).

At this point it is necessary to situate the idea of decentring humankind (whilst still retaining culpability and responsibility) in the earlier discussion of asymmetrical subjectivities. While on the one hand we are all humus, some humus continues to be valued more than others, to repurpose the anti-racist and feminist dictum. Decentring humankind requires further nuance. Mirroring the earlier idea that it is privileged subjectivities and identities that should divest from power, presence, and visibility, it follows that it is these same privileged human subjects who should undertake the project of decentring. It is white, Western, imperial and colonising humanity that has subjugated and destroyed the lifeworlds of indigenous humanity, and eviscerated the lifeworlds of other sentient ecologies in both the global North and the global South.

Yes then to the earth-centred *Tomorrow People* as compassionate assemblages who know they are part-bacteria, part-plant, part-animal. Yes also to The Tomorrow Plants, The Tomorrow Animals and Bacteria. And yes to the today people-becoming-assemblages receding, and reseeded habitats for multispecies flourishing.

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Published on the occasion of *The Tomorrow People*, an exhibition at Adam Art Gallery Te Pātaka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, 22 July–1 October 2017.

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1 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, p. 55.

2 Haraway, op. cit., p. 3.