Identity in the disrupted time of COVID-19: Performativity, crisis, mobility and ethics

Rob Cover

RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, 3051, Australia

A B S T R A C T

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a global cultural crisis, experienced through various losses of everydayness, including particularly restrictions on mobility and the sudden emergence of new fears and anxieties over infection. This paper theorises some of the ways in which that crisis can be understood in cultural and discursive terms, as a rupture in normativity, a disturbance in social relationality and as a state of exception. Drawing on Judith Butler's theories of performativity, the paper investigates how such a cultural rupture can be understood to affect performative subjectivity, identity and selfhood, whereby a breach in normative everydayness prompts the re-constitution of subjectivity itself. The paper explores how the reconfiguration of identity is experienced as corporeal and as a site of anxiety and lost dignity. The final section of the paper draws some initial conclusions about the potency of cultural and identity transformation for new ethics of non-violence, arguing that the obligation to resist norms of mobility and contact is an ethical obligation of necessary cohabitation.

1. Introduction

By early March of 2020, the reality that the world was at extreme risk of the COVID-19 global pandemic was beginning to be understood in many parts of the world as a sudden rupture to everyday life. Although the World Health Organisation announced a global health emergency in January 2020, news that all parts of the world were facing a pandemic of proportions not witnessed in living memory circulated in March prompting responses that can be understood as producing discontinuities with everydayness and, therefore, normative practices of identity, belonging, relationality and being. Governments in many countries responded in different ways, with some announcing urgent social distancing, bans on gatherings, closure of non-essential businesses and services, lockdowns of the population in private homes, border closures and quarantine measures. In many cases, bio-hazard and bio-security legislation was enacted and policing measures to enforce compliance were expanded. Over the year, responses to the various measures were mixed, including protests of lockdown and curfew measures and substantial support for governments that took action. Conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus or government interventions in several Western nations circulated, while simultaneously there was a substantial increase in public interest in fact-checking, factual information and medical knowledge. Debates about measures, government and private

responses in all parts of the world have continued, particularly in the context of politics, health knowledge, impact on families and work, economic theory, histories of plagues and histories of economic depression. Engagement with knowledge, debate and discourse on these topics has undoubtedly had an impact on how people everywhere view their world, particularly those who are less likely to be exposed to the actual health realities of infection or mortality.

What matters, however, for thinking about subjectivity, embodiment, and emplacement in the world is not so much the disruption that a pandemic has brought and has been experienced in diverse ways in different parts of global as well as experienced differently depending on socio-economic, urban/rural and gender demarcations in local settings. Rather, if we are to understand the experience of the disruption at an ontological level, then it is necessary to make sense of the shared experience of *everydayness* as a normative, middle-class stability over time, and how it is *everydayness* that has been radically ruptured. I am arguing here that regardless of geographic or social setting, rupture itself has occurred for very large numbers of people in ways which fundamentally shift how identities of relationality and belonging are constituted, performed and articulated. Such a destabilisation in the normative and everyday cultural resources that are deployed for the persistence of identity—which may indeed be a permanent break from normativities of the past—have significant ramifications for how we

relate to each other, engage with our senses of self, and how we conceive ethical obligations of care for the self and others. Judith Butler's theories of identity performativity have enormous capacity to further our understanding as to what it means to be a subject, a human subject, to be subject to practices of immobility and stillness, and a subject reconstituted within the crisis of COVID-19. Performativity of the human subject is constituted in discourse, and the contemporary flows of information about people, populations and the world are a significant component of the framework through which we perceive ourselves, our relation to populations and our relation to space (Cover, 2020).

One aspect of such everydayness is the way in which *mobility* has come to be a part of the everyday. Mobility is, as John Urry (2007) has pointed out, the marker of contemporaneity in contemporary society: ubiquitous, often desired, a structure of feeling that emerged in the last three decades of the twentieth century and from which there is no turning back. This is the mobility of movement in cities in which we ourselves are part of the city-assemblage (Grosz, 1995); it is the mobility of travel for work and leisure; the movement of students to study at universities and colleges in locations remote from their homes; the ease of visitation among different households and across age-groups such as children regularly seeing grandparents in retirement homes and hospices; and of course the border crossings the norm of which is both ease for some populations, citizens and groups and restrictions for others such as the subject *sans papier* for whom neither mobility nor stillness is an option (Derrida, 1999: 101). Mobility is not, of course, ubiquitous. The figure of the middle-class *flâneur* (Featherstone, 2006: 594) or the travelling millennial influencer sharing images of a persistently liminal experience of space (Wyn & Woodman, 2006: 496–497) are disrupted by immobility in ways which are different, perhaps, from the immobility experienced by those who were already less mobile. For example, the refugee in a camp or in detention with an unknowable future (Pugliese, 2004: 299), or the person with a physical disability already living in an urban setting designed for athletes (Woodward, 2002: 104) experience new forms of immobility different from, say, middle-class daily commuters. Likewise, those whose labour supports the infrastructure of cities and cannot be undertaken from home such as the drivers and cleaners who Sarah Sharma (2008: 452) identifies as persons made subject to particular modes of the relationship between capital, space and time, experience the pandemic's forced immobility often in the context of financial precarity. Among the array of anxieties, stresses and changes that COVID-19 has brought, from fear of illness and death to new ways of speaking about populations and life, it is the radical disruption to a liberal perspective on mobility as a (western) norm, often articulated as a 'right', that arguably has had the greatest impact on how we perceive and perform selfhood in relation to the world.

This paper revisits some of Butler's influential work on performativity and identity, alongside other poststructuralist cultural theories of subjectivity, to consider what a global crisis of this magnitude means for how we differently perceive, articulate, perform and recognise the self as a human subject, a subject of belonging, a subject of space and mobility and a subject of ethics. I will begin with a discussion on how we can apprehend the current COVID-19 pandemic in the terms of crisis, drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall and Giorgio Agamben to provide an account of approaches to understanding cultural disruption and what such rupture, crisis, exception or contingency might mean for a sustained sense of selfhood in the immediate future. I will then work through how Butler's theories of gender performativity can be deployed to consider not only how we perform selfhood as human subjects, but how the crisis provides the setting for a re-constitution of the performative self. Thirdly, I argue that to understand the shift involves making sense of how the change in identity stability is experienced and articulated through a consideration of the body—particularly, the anxious body. This allows us to make sense of some examples of global behaviour around the hoarding of base bodily goods such as toilet paper, and in regard to protests related to the demand for a return to normativity and mobility. Finally, I will conclude with some statements about ethics:

how the conjunction of rupture, re-constituted identity and anxiety opens opportunities not only for aggression and the violence of exclusion of populations but, in a separate register, a renewed perspective on the obligation of care of the other towards the other in terms of the stillness required to avoid spreading the violence of infection of other subjects, including subjects we do not know and may never meet.

2. Crisis and rupture

In the weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic began to be understood as a global event restricting movement and border-crossings, and dominating news and public discourse, we began to see two opposing registers of discourse in relation to the idea of the norm. The first discussed the pandemic in terms of a 'return to normal', focused on when and what that might look like. The second accentuated the idea of a recognisable norm as permanently gone, with discussion on the extent of change rather than recovery. In terms of the first, we initially would hear people say "this will be over before we know it", or "soon, we'll be saying 'do you remember the coronavirus' just as we said 'do you remember the Swine Flu'". Normativity, however, has been invoked in other ways: placards at protests in several cities in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia demanding a "return to normal" by ending social distancing measures or mobility restrictions, with the idea that despite the viral risk there will be an everydayness, often erroneously assuming the SAR-CoV-2 virus has little difference from a heavy season of 'the flu'. Politicians such as former USA President Donald Trump would speak of "business as usual" while demands have come, often from the political right, to protect economies by ensuring normal commerce that depends on everyday mobility and movement. Finally, much talk from November 2020 onwards about the programme of vaccines has been grounded in an assumption that COVID-19 is a *temporary* disruption from which we will re-emerge to the safety and everydayness of normal movement, behaviour and health once everyone is vaccinated—often disregarding the destabilising reports about the real expected rates of effectiveness or the impact of mutations and new strains of the virus. Alternatively, we bear witness to everyday conversations now that (perhaps rightly) claim any norm related to everyday life, mobility, movement, travel, economy and work that we have ever known is lost as a future becomes unknowable. Both of these registers, however, are marked by the idea of COVID-19 *as* a rupture, resulting in new discourses of exception and contingency that emerge to condition how we relate to the self and others.

There have been four main discourses in contemporary public sphere dialogue that matter to identity:

(1) A biopolitical dialogue that looks to the figure of 'population' in terms of numbers, statistics, normative distributions, impact of the virus on different age-groups, border closures, implications for migrant populations, vaccination programmes and hospital capacities. Biopolitics involves the administrative attempt to modify aspects of discipline for use in broader-scale governance (Foucault, 2004: 242). While biopolitics is a normative function of governance and administration focused on the politicisation of life itself (Lemke, 2011: 3), it becomes a point of intent and interest in public sphere discourse in various waves, usually when the idea of population re-emerges as a political, cultural or social issue.

(2) An individualistic and liberalistic frame of discourse that is both disciplinary and interested not in preservation of populations but the conduct of people (Macey, 2009). This is witnessed in news reports, social media discussions, official and informal advice on how individuals (and families) can, should or currently are navigating life in a way to continue to live, stories on where it is safe for a person to go, how to stay fit when working from home or guidance on the home-schooling of children, and so on.

(3) There is an apocalyptic discourse that draws on a whole trajectory of literary ideas, from Mary Shelley's 1825 novel *The Last Man* (2004) to films about viral outbreaks such as *Outbreak* and *Contagion* (2011), to discourse that typically frames COVID-19 not in terms of an end to civilisation and humanity, but thinking on a permanent shift on globality, movement, economy, international trade, consumption practices and entertainment. A seismic shift. The apocalyptic also incorporates a conspiratorial rhetoric that fixates on ideas of an evil agency (China, Bill Gates, Dr Fauci, extra-terrestrials) deliberately developing or enhancing the SARS-CoV-2 virus to either take control of the world, or to end it.

(4) Finally, there has been a discourse that relates to expressions of vulnerability and precarity that draws on both the biopolitical and liberalistic perspectives outlined above. Vulnerability, as we know from Butler, is a shared condition of human subjectivity which is constituted from the very beginning in the embodied need for mutual care and dependency on the social for life itself (Butler, 2004: 20). That shared experience of primary vulnerability is, however, hidden by interpretative frames which figure subjects' "worthiness of protection" differentially in ways which allow some lives to be fostered and some to be disregarded (Butler, 2009: 50). While the shared experience of a struggle against a pandemic *might* have invoked the shared experience of bodily precarity, the reality has been that the discursive frames that differentiate between worthy and unworthy lives have remained in place, such that various articulations about vulnerability tend to be particular and dichotomised (various groups suffering job losses while others do not), tendencies towards nationalist claims (such as around access to vaccines over shared responsibility for the globe), and the galvanisation of claims to vulnerability in certain conspiracy theories (such as that some populations are seen to be vulnerable to manipulation by a 'deep state' supposedly working for a supposed liberal elite). Here, crisis and rupture are figured as moments demanding redress, even if those claims to redress about by those already benefitting from extant socio-economic structures.

Importantly, rupture has rarely been experienced across the globe as political crisis. While politicians, government ministers and political representatives have figured more prominently in print/television news and social media providing updates, and there has been a clear *politicisation* over various government's strategies to combat the virus or ensure public safety, most governments have remained relatively stable in popularity and support (Donald Trump's administration a key exception), with that stability correlating often in spikes in infection rate and the ability to reduce or remedy those spikes, as seen in the case of Narendra Modi's government in India and Boris Johnson's government in the United Kingdom. In that sense, the cultural rupture is not experienced or expressed as a constitutional or political crisis, but a criticism of the efficiency of government responsiveness to events as they occur in temporally-limited instances. While lockdowns and other population health measures have evoked protests, these have not resulted in revolutionary activity or wholesale loss of confidence in extant governments in any part of the world. Rather, the experience of crisis and rupture occurs away from the formal political field and is expressed in relation to changes in the lived reality of *everydayness.* Here, we find the most significant discourse framing the disruption to identity itself, and this loss of everydayness is marked partly by changes to working practices for large numbers of middle-class, office and professional workers (such as working from home), job losses (especially for those who have never before experienced unemployment), shifts in everyday routines (homeschooling, changes to grocery shopping, curfews, closures of gyms and other sites of exercise), new fears about touching or being in the presence of other human bodies, anxieties about economic recovery or maintaining labour or business profitability, the unknowability of any

return at this stage to a sense of 'normality' around shopping or entertainment routines and, perhaps most markedly, the radical restriction on mobility. It is a disruption to the *temporal* flow of everydayness, what we can consider the chrononormativity of lived reality through time and movement through space (Sharma, 2013, 2014), for which the norm is almost always a white, middle-class framing of everyday routines and expectations around movement. That is, the way in which bodies move and operate in temporal arrangements and local/global mobilities as rights, desires, aspirations and norms is radically disrupted in such a way as to disrupt our relationship with space, selfhood and relationality.

This rupture of the norm can be understood in cultural and discursive terms through the concept of *crisis*. Crises that shift how we perceive ourselves are not, of course, in any way new. Rather, much of the twenty-first century has been marked by various crises that produce new arrangements of being, of politics, economy and culture. For example, the contemporary populism that marks politics in the United States and United Kingdom, for example, is a response to the global financial crisis alongside the crisis of de-industrialisation in parts leading to exclusion and deprivation, and thus particular kinds of politics of marginalisation, aggression and identity. For Antonio Gramsci (1971: 179), socio-political organic crises emerge in ways which demonstrate to the public that "uncurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves." The COVID-19 pandemic, however, is perhaps marked as a crisis that serves to rupture a relationship with the recent historical past. This is not because the changes to liveability are more profound than in the case of other kinds of cultural shifts (even if they are), but resulting from the temporal *suddenness* that is arguably more upsetting to normativity than the slower unfolding of other kinds of crisis. Chrononormativities describe the role played by perceptions of time and temporality in producing conformities and truths. They are a particularly powerful node in the constitution of identities which not only draw on cultural norms but stabilise alongside the longevity of those norms which, themselves, become stereotypes over time and about the place of the self in time. What is significant about the relationship between time and normativity is that norms come to be norms because they have stabilised *over time* in such a way as to remove their historical specificity. While the slow unfolding of change makes it difficult to apprehend the ongoing cultural evolution of a norm, a sudden rupture not only draws attention to role of temporality in normativity but allows a shift to be represented as the end of one norm and the potential unknowability as to whether or not another will replace it.

Stuart Hall argued that, rather than being understood as a rupture that destroys the past, crises are *formative*. He described such productive formation in response to crises this way: "a new balance of forces, the emergence of new elements,… new political configurations and 'philosophies', a profound restructuring of… ideological discourses… pointing to a new result, a new sort of 'settlement'—'within certain limits'" (1979: 15). Although intended to describe the operations of populist power blocs, this also quite nicely describes the way in which the *sudden* shift to everydayness brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic produces the space for the emergence of a new set of practices for identity, liveability, mobility and belonging: unknowable and unforeseeable, operating in the liminality of radical change in process. Suddenness drives the representation of the pandemic not as remarkable or novel but as crisis itself. Liminality, defined as the quality of ambiguity of being located physically, emotionally, culturally or in terms of identity in a space or time of threshold (Turner, 1969), is a useful way of framing the contemporary situation of COVID-19, particularly in terms of the temporality involved in anticipating how the newly available vaccines might restore normality; or in the terms of the extent to which the virus may have as-yet unknown longer-term effects on otherwise healthy bodies. This is alongside the liminality, of course, of the length of lockdown and social distancing measures, the consistency of employment and economic stability, or bans on international travel, among many other examples of unknowable time.

The context of the liminal space of crisis, in which we see shifts in the

very sense of how culture, relationality and belonging operate, are truly rupturing to the frameworks of being and subjectivity, particularly as they are experienced on the scale of a global pandemic in the contemporary era of globalisation—there are no spaces on the planet that are inhabited by human beings and yet retain a normativity. It results in the re-framing of humanity under a key question of liminal unknowability: not knowing if people (broadly defined) will have the resilience as individuals or populations to embrace the persistence of change in a way which keeps self-identity together and maintains harmonious relationships with the world. Subjects seek ways in which to cope in crisis such as religion, pleasure or intoxication (Derrida, 1995), or through other means of finding a grounding or sense of foundation, no matter how much such grounds are always from the very beginning mythical mechanisms to enable the coherence of identity.

The unknowability that is opened by a cultural rupture is, for Maurizio Lazzarato (2013), an aporia, since rupture emerges from both from within history and from that which is outside history (20). In the context of COVID-19, it is arguable that the massive disruption to the everyday was both foreseeable and unforeseeable. The mobility of human bodies that is brought about by global travel pushed through a tourism and travel norm that constitutes one of the largest industries in the world, accounting for at least "8.7 per cent of world employment and 10.3 per cent of world GDP" (Urry, 2007: 4) actively predicts the spread of disease among human populations. At the same time, the unprecedented scale and virulence of SARS-CoV-2, its 'alienness' to human life as a virus found previously only in animals, and its impact on populations, economies and mobility beyond any other disease in living memory makes it simultaneously that which emerges from both *within* and *outside* of the unfolding of cultural history. This is how *crisis* comes to be *cultural rupture*. While Lazzarato rightly sees 'crisis' as a *permanent* mode of contemporary western and international politics and history since at least the 1970s, an active cultural product designed to enable neoliberal and biopolitical governance (2013: 10), the crisis operates as a *transformative rupture* through that aporia of seen and unseen, knowable and unknowable (Duggan, 2003: 87). The form that transformation takes is, then, not something that can be mapped in advance, opening a further space of liminality in which subjectivity loses its ground. If, as I will argue below, we take the performativity of the self to be constituted on the one hand in relationalities that demand certain norms of mobilities and, on the other hand, in the temporal continuity of cultural normativities we usually consider 'civilisation', then constitutive forces of subjectivity to which we remain attached are disturbed twice over.

Before turning to the performativity of selfhood in the disturbance of COVID-19, however, it is worth reflecting on one further aspect of crisis as it takes form in the contemporary setting: the state of exception that arises as a result of the various measures that have, by necessity, been undertaken by most authorities and administrations in the world. This presents a third element of the representation of crisis that disrupts chrononormativities on which we depend for the coherence, intelligibility and self-knowability of identity. Giorgio Agamben's (1995) framing of states of exception usefully informs ways in which we can understand crisis and exception together. Although Agamben's argument is that the state of exception is, in the simultaneity of sovereign and biopolitical forms of power, a normative framework of contemporary politics and therefore not an exception at all, his articulation of the origins of the exception provides an important way of thinking through the meaning of crisis in the context of COVID-19. For Agamben, the exception emerges in its "absolute form when it is a question of creating a situation in which juridical rules can be valid" such that it establishes an order for an "everyday frame of life" (16). That is, the sovereign decision behind the exception both founds the rule and decides when the rule no longer applies. If we put this into, for example, the liberal and individualist rule of mobility (for those not already marked as excluded from migration and movement, of course) such that a subject moves through public space at will, then the rule enacted by bio-security conventions, new legislation and disciplinary articulation is produced as both decision and exception. Where such restrictions on mobility exist, it is with both an end-date and a pronouncement that the end-date may not be as advised, giving it the true sense of the state of exception.

This exception to a particular rule of movement operates not through crisis but as sovereign disruption of culture presented as contingency. It is not to say that restrictions on mobility that save lives are in any way bad or problematic or a loss of freedom—as some protesters in the United States of America have vehemently argued—but it is to say that it creates a substantial shift in cultural normativity that undoes the 'expectation' of identity marked by mobility. As Fiona Jenkins notes, contingency emerges from within the instability of the field of meaning "as an uncertain futural dimension that is irreducibly a part of normative life" and as that which can be "figured as the rupture of normativity itself" (Jenkins, 2010: 110). In this sense, the 'time' of the exception to the rule of free mobility—for some—is a disruption not only of the norm, but of normativities on which the subject depends for performance. In addition to the first two aspects of crisis, the disruption of the relationality experience via mobility as a disruption to cultural norms, the state of exception adds a third layer further complexifying cultural change and disjuncture by creating not a temporary situation of non-normative stillness but an additional unknowability on the extent to which stillness is demanded.

3. Performativity

If identity is performed in accord with discourse, relationality and cultural norms, then the disruption to these three mechanises a situation in which identity as recognised, coherent and intelligible is itself disrupted. We can make sense of this in considering Judith Butler's framework of the performativity of identity and its capacity to be reconstituted in the 'encounter' with the rupture and the emergence of the new. Working from a post-structuralist and anti-foundationalist perspective that draws on Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, Butler's theory of performativity is based on the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing *process* of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being, whereby becoming is a sequence of acts, that retroactively constitute identity (Butler, 1990). That is, the performance of a facet of identity draws on the demands of a discursively-given knowledge framework that establishes the necessary fiction of an actor behind the act, a doer behind the deed; rather, of course, the self or 'I' is made up of a matrix of identity categories, experiences and labels (Butler, 1990: 40) that through repetition lend the *illusion* of an inner identity core driving those actions (Butler, 1993: 12). Where Butler's theories provide an important perspective for the study of identity construction is in extending the very idea of performance from the bodily, the experiential, the affective into the field of belonging and relationality (in space and among other subjects) enabled by mobility and movement. In other words, the norm of mobility alongside normal economic activity, shopping, consumption, entertainment, labour, cultural relations, political processes and so on are all just as much experienced as performative as any other act of behaviour, feeling or affect, and are thereby all just as equally constitutive of a sense of self and identity.

Although Butler's work is complex and wide-ranging, there are four nodes of her theories of performative identity which are significant in guiding the thinking on how performative subjectivity is undone or troubled by the rupture to cultural norms in the everyday. These are best summarised as follows: (a) extending the work of both Nietzsche and Foucault, there is no core, essential self from which behaviours and actions emerge, only a set of performances that retroactively produce the illusion of an inner actor behind the acts who is, indeed, a mythical *effect* of those performances (Butler, 1993: 12); (b) the self is performed by the citation and repetition of discursively-given norms, categories, stereotypes, labels, practices of movement and mobility, forms of stillness, and affective relations with the body in space which stabilise over time; (c) selves are constituted in discourse but can be re-constituted or reconfigured differently in the encounter with different, new,

imaginative discursive arrangements (Butler, 1991: 18) which can include new categories or alternative norms of identity encountered, for example, in the context of contingency, exception and crisis or the representation of these; and (d) while never complete or without flaw, the process of performing identity occurs within a narrative of coherence over time, motivated by a cultural demand or imperative that we are coherent, intelligible and recognisable to others in order to fulfil the demands of relationality, social participation and belonging (Butler, 1997: 27). In other words, a sense of self is forged across an array of identity categories or 'co-ordinates' which include common axes of discrimination such as gender, ethnicity, ability and age but are also comprised of spurious experiences, practices and ways of being bodily in relation to space and to others. Such frameworks of selfhood are articulated through an ongoing process of 'shoring up' or 'answering' any anomalies between those co-ordinates to present a coherent, recognisable and intelligible self over time. Finally, since identifications are, as Butler has noted, "multiple and contestatory" (1993: 99), and the subject is produced at the "cost of its own complexity" (Hall, 2004: 127), the demand for coherence, intelligibility and recognisability of subjectivity depends on the persistent need to simplify or ignore the ordinary, everyday contingencies, anomalies and fractures of cultural time in order to practice the self not only within but *as* an everydayness.

This framework of making sense of the performativity of the subject is all very well in the *ordinary* course of history, culture and discourse represented as sometimes-insidious but always-stable. But what happens when that is disrupted by a pandemic that encourages panic, economic and political restructuring, states of exception, restrictions on everyday mobility, huge changes in labour relations and spaces of labour (such as working from home for some), sudden unemployment, sudden unavailability of the consumer goods, shops, and spaces of consumption and entertainment upon which the bourgeois normative figure is constituted as an intelligible and recognisable subject?

An aspect of performative identity that stems from Butler's work which is less-often invoked is that of transformation or re-constitution. The obscurity of this concern is most likely the result of the preoccupation with the ways in which we come to perform fictionally "fixed" identity categories, rather than how they are diverted, morphed, transmuted. Butler provides a useful example related to sexual identity: concerning the ways in which the category of selfhood "I" comes to perform a lesbian identity that stabilises partially through repetitive citation, she suggests that: "It is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I'; paradoxically it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes as well the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes" (Butler, 1991: 18). Underlying this notion of reconstitution is what is perhaps best referred to as an *encounter:* the "I" can be reconstituted as a different kind of "I" through the repeated play and performance of the category and its recognisable, intelligible codes of behaviour and desire, but *only* within the context of having encountered new discourses, relationalities and normative frames of cultural practice that were not previously available.

Although Butler was discussing reconstitution in terms of sexuality—which is perhaps to be seen as more malleable since sexuality and sexual orientation fixates on something which is 'inaugurated' at a particular point on the threshold between the different discourses of childhood and young adulthood (Cover, 2019)—the conceptualisation of identity change provides a way of making sense of what happens to identity when we consider the temporal rupture between the past norms of everydayness and the present cultural contingencies, practices, restrictions to mobility and anxieties over health, life and the future. That is, in the encounter with the changed circumstances of the world, mobility, time, space, relationships and consumption brought about by COVID-19, the greater emphasis in public sphere discourse on biopolitical frameworks of discussing health and populations, the persistent deployment of new disciplinary measures designed to protect or enhance subjects in changed circumstances and the apocalyptic rhetoric in some quarters, the subject is insistently re-constituted in the loss of

the constitutive force of the prior everyday, and transformed through the encounter with liminality, unknowability and new chrononormativities.

In Butler's (1990) analysis, *transformation* of the subject is possible only through a rejection of any identity foundation, which she sees as foreclosing in advance the "emergence of new identity concepts" and the "transformation or expansion of existing identity concepts" (15). Such transformative potential as given in poststructuralist accounts is neither a complete rejection of identity as a cultural process, nor a suggestion that fragmentary and contradictory identities are possible outside of a cultural concept of internal unity (Connolly, 178). Rather, the transformation of the self into new identity configurations occurs in the practice of encountering that which produces not only changes in self-definition but bodily effects (Cooper, 2000: 108). The intellectual potential for transformation through identity performativity is, then, at odds with the dominance of an anti-constructivist, biological essentialism in contemporary popular ideas of identity, which is of course a framework that not only denies the possibility of change and discourages attempts at it (Buchbinder, 1994: 6), but actively circulates the cultural demand to resist incoherence, unintelligibility or the multiplicity and complexity of the self. The affective sense of disruption or transformation of the self, and the enlightenment demands of self-consistency and unity establish an anxiety that is both bodily and relational, discharging the subject of subjectivity and insisting that subjects find new groundings for being subjects.

What is experienced in the COVID-19 disruption to subjectivity is a liminal passage towards that as-yet unknowable altered subjecthood. The loss of *coherent* subjectivity that is produced by the cultural rupture of drastic and sudden change to the everyday requires grieving. Like all identity loss, change or disruption there is a practice of mourning that must be undergone before transformation and re-constitution can take place. In the context of COVID-19, we see grieving not for those who have been infected or died of the illness, but grieving expressed through anger and rejection of the requirements for social distancing and lockdown. Such practices of grieving for the self in the era of COVID-19 are best witnessed, perhaps, in the protests in the United States against the health protection and bio-safety measures put in place in several states. Looking for coherence and unity by drawing together protests around 5G mobile telecommunications, anti-Biden protesters, pro-Trump rallying, protests over attempts by Democrat governors to bring in more restrictive gun ownership laws, and anti-vaccination rhetoric. This mobility and assembling of bodies to protest is in the form identified by Butler that galvanises around certain claims to vulnerability (Butler, 2015: 9). The fact that those claims may in an ethical approach to the inequitable distribution of vulnerability, it remains that such vulnerability is experienced as meaningful and generates an attachment of some bodies to others. While politically, such claims are all at odds with each other, they become sensible and meaningfully unified in the practice of grieving the loss of identity coherence that COVID-19 has brought. It is, perhaps, too simple to consider such protests an outpouring of frustration or fear; rather they can better be understood as a weak attempt at producing a new foundation for identity in opposition to the instability of identity itself and its vulnerability to reconstitution and transformation. In some ways, such protests are an attempt to re-assert a sense of *dignity* which, as Francis Fukuyama (2019) has recently argued, is central to the practice of twenty-first century identity. Dignity here emerges as denial of the non-unificatory nature of the various items protested, such that protesting itself becomes the assertion of dignified subjectivity.

4. Anxiety and bodies

Having addressed how some of the ways in which the loss of identity due to the sudden rupture of cultural normativities have come into play, it is valuable to turn to some aspects about the body. One element that has been interesting and notable in the first few weeks of the COVID-19

emergency and crisis has been the unexpected hoarding of toilet paper in several countries (particularly the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand). Toilet paper was the surprising chosen item to hoard, rather than food, cash, petrol, batteries or books—it was (literally) fought over in supermarkets by people filling trolleys of a supply that would last months or years, rather than buying food. The fact that it is this bodily function to which attention was turned is surprising, but less so when we consider the way in which it emerges in the context of a re-constitution of selfhood.

I would like to make the case here that the concentration on toilet paper rather than other more urgent aspects of survival such as food is indicative not of a panicked response to the declaration of emergency and pandemic, but a symptom of the reconstitutive formation of the crisis and rupture which creates a disturbance in selfhood not as a psychic being but at the very level of subjective corporeality. This disturbance should not be read as the change in subjectivity itself, but as the liminal passage through which a focus on very basic bodily needs becomes the site of attachment and worry while new configures of normativity and selfhood stabilise (Cover, 2013: 417). The disturbance here is, indeed, very specifically one which draws attention to the body as an object of fixation through which subjectivity attempts to stabilise itself in the process of transformation. The self lived as a corporeal subject is, of course, markedly significant for the understanding of vulnerability and the precarity of life whereby the risk of illness or accident are "built into the very conception of bodily life… always given over to modes of sociality and environment that limit its individual autonomy" (Butler, 2009: 30–31). The subject's vulnerability is highlighted (to oneself and to each other) by the very basic *bodily needs* that draw attention to the precarity of subjecthood: toilet and hygiene. Indeed, this serves as an explanatory framework for the radical hoarding of—and obsessive discourse upon—toilet paper at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in late February and early March 2020, and in many subsequent experiences of temporary lockdown, particularly in Australia and the United Kingdom.

The re-constitution of the performative self in the context of the cultural rupture brought about by COVID-19 and its changes to everyday mobility is thus something which prompted a re-configuration of subjectivity in such a dramatic way as to give focus on the most aspect of the body, its excretion. As a disturbance in selfhood, or what Cathy Caruth (1995: 154) refers to as an "event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding,*" the performance of the subject vis-à-vis relationality with the other and with space and time is radically re-oriented—the logic through which the normal, temporal activities of the body such as excretion are so radically made to feel precarious that people were willing to fight each other to buy the most possible toilet paper (of all things). It is tempting, of course, to consider a psychoanalytic framework here, although once we are thinking about the reconstitutive force of the cultural rupture we can see instead that it is not within the context of a disrupted psyche that people turned their attention to the most base of bodily functions, but through the disturbance to the *I;* a re-constituted subjectivity that recognises the simultaneous vulnerability of the self and the precarity of ways-of-being that we ordinarily frame as civilisation (Cover, 2013). One is not re-constituted as a subject fixated on basic bodily functions; rather, the sudden attachment to an anxiety over the body's functions is experienced through the process of transformation and re-stabilisation through which such anxieties naturally dissipate.

The toilet paper example is, of course, the most severe expression of the kind of anxiety produced in the reconstitution of subjectivity produced by the sudden cultural affront of COVID-19. Alongside the protests, the despair, and the baffled silence of many initially, it is a useful reminder that while the effects of the response to COVID-19 can be rationalised, the very threat of the virus is a bodily one, a threat brought about by many of the norms of everyday relationality: bodies that touch, bodies that breathe the same air, bodies that leave behind potentially-infected drops of fluid. Vulnerability is, ultimately, always about the

body (Gilson, 2011: 35), but it is in the context of cultural rupture that the unified coherence of the psychic mapping of selfhood and corporeal life are disturbed, re-configured and awaiting transformation into that which can be provided by the eventual stabilisation of a new environment, culture, discourse, practice of relationality, capacity to figure oneself in terms of new movements and new stillnesses, and in the sense of chrononormative futurity.

5. Conclusion: transformation for ethics?

I would like to end this paper with some remarks on the ethical implications of COVID-19 and the ethical opportunities that emerge in the context of cultural rupture and the reconstitution of the performative self. A useful way of thinking about ethical relationality here is to take to ask some of the unethical practices witnessed in the past few weeks when people who are ordered into social distancing and lockdown fail to do so, openly defy lockdown orders or complain about the restrictions on mobility through cities and spaces. In many cases, the position that demands the right to have the mobility restrictions removed is an individualist, liberal-humanist one. It is only, of course, a minority of subjects who articulate such a political position, but it is usually framed in terms of a civil rights discourse that makes spurious arguments about the constitutionality of lockdown measures, claims to a Neo-Darwinist 'survival of the fittest' and a consideration of the impact of the virus only on the individual complainant with disregard for the ways in which the lives of others might be made more vulnerable or put at risk but that individual's movement or unwitting carriage of the virus. In some cases, arguably, that liberal-individualist code of complaint is a particular kind of response to the re-constitutive force of crisis whereby a perception of inviolability and a denial or disregard of the vulnerability of the other is force by which subjectivity as a social being is articulated.

Ethics is not, as Butler points out, something related to individual subjectivity or about subjects in their singularity. Rather, this framework is grounded in the fact that, as Estelle Ferrarese has put it (2011: 5), "participation of all or many within a society… is what guarantees that the performance is continually repeated." As Butler has argued (2009: 179–180), the conditions for an ethical responsiveness to others includes not just "private resources", such as the discourses, experiences, rights and mediations available to subjects, but the mediating forms and frames that make responsiveness possible. Subsequent to her valuable work on vulnerability, recognition and ethics (Butler, 2004, 2009), Butler expanded on her ethics of non-violence by foregrounding the notion of cohabitation which she drew from Hannah Arendt's work on genocide. For Butler (2011) cohabitation begins by acknowledging the heterogeneity of the Earth's population "as an irreversible condition of social and political life itself" (83). Such heterogeneity can include a massive range of diversities expressed by people differentially from around the world and in ways which may never be recognisable but nevertheless call for recognition of a right to cohabit the Earth or a particular region or site. In the context of COVID-19, that ethics is one which acknowledges the different risks to different people, of different age-groups, alongside the broader unknowability of the extent of damage the SARS-CoV-2 virus might do to bodies—at the time of writing the realities of viral harm are as yet unknown. The ethical demand here is one which obliges subjects, prior to their subjectivity and alongside the reconstitutive force of cultural rupture, to do the utmost towards cohabitation. Cohabitation means that:

> we not only live with those we never chose, and to whom we may feel no social sense of belonging, but we are also obligated to preserve those lives and the plurality of which they form a part. In this sense, concrete political norms and ethical prescriptions emerge from the unchosen character of these mode of cohabitation. To cohabit the earth is prior to any possible community or nation or neighborhood. We might choose where to live, and who to live by, but we cannot choose with whom to cohabit the earth (84).

Butler is not suggesting here that we cohabit the earth and therefore must live in peace in a way that locate those we do not wish to live by in places other than 'here'. Rather, this is to argue that there is an obligation to an ethical relationality with others that is obligatory because it precedes our very subjectivities and is the condition for it. The point I want to underline is that such an obligation for cohabitation is to ensure that others (individuals, other populations) are not excluded from liveability and futurity in whatever new form that might take.

An ethics built on the primary, prior obligation to cohabitation is, thus, an obligation not to do violence to the other. In this case, it is not to do the violence of spreading an illness with which one *may have been infected,* while of course not violently excluding those who unwittingly passed on the virus to others in the early days before there was greater clarity on such social obligations. This can, therefore, be an obligation to resist the subjective desire towards mobility in favour of a stillness that prevents our corporeality from being weaponised to harm others. The social benefits of opening up the potential of subjective re-constitution, despite the widespread anxiety such transformations cause, are that they invoke the potentiality of social shifts towards ethical ways of being among one another. This is not about liberal or individualised acts of kindness or the mutuality of a social contract. Rather, it is potentially the beginnings of a reconfiguration not only the performative self, but of the practices of relationality, whereby the capacity to spread a virus points to the requirement and possibility of a greater recognition of vulnerability as the shared condition of subjectivity. While new forms of mutual care were foregrounded in some journalism at the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, by early 2021 we might say that such an ethical position has not been taken up in any meaningful, global way in favour of the 'return to normativity' discourses.

In the context of the cultural rupture and the liminal space in which subjectivity 'hovers' as it undergoes a process of transformation to be re-aligned with new discourses, arrangements, practices, mobilities and relationalities, then, COVID-19 potentially plays a pedagogical role. This is not one whereby pre-existing subjects learn to treat each other better or in less violent ways, but in which the re-constitution of selfhood is one which involves the transformation of subjects into subjects of connectedness by drawing attention to the disconnect that has been necessary to prevent the violence of spreading disease. A useful, contemporary way to think about the obligation to cohabitation with the vulnerable other, the displaced person, the stranger, the Earth, its viruses and threats, and its air and so on, is to think about that obligation through the *network-edness* of subjectivity, population, relationality, space and liveability (Cover, 2020). That genocide of another group or people and its culture and knowledges is wrong is not difficult or problematic to communicate in the twenty-first century. However, when we understand that such practices that either enable or refuse cohabitation relate to the conceptual, embodied and subjective flows between and across space in a globalised world of borders, mobilities and relationships, we are obliged to extend the obligation of non-violence into the field of relationality not just between people but people in space.

The interconnectedness of bodies thrown into a space for which we today have uncertainty over the sustainability of its capability always to preserve life provides us with new openings (starting points) for thinking about how to live together *as* population. Here, the opportunity to rethink not how we live in the context of a natural threat that takes the form of a microscopic virus but, simultaneously, how we live as subjects on a world made precarious by many of the globalist activities and expressions that have threatened its very environment. As starting points, these are not necessarily instances in which we can envision immediate practical outcomes, new arrangements, post-national and anti-violent codes of conduct or even best ways to manage migration and carbon pollution reduction. The engagement necessary here is one inflected by the need to open up subjectivity towards new attitudes that *try* to embrace more ethical relations that we experience now. Re-thinking the meaning of population, belonging and liveability is at the centre of that enterprise. Whether that interconnectedness of the shared

vulnerability of corporeal subjects emerges as a key framing discourse for a re-constituted subjectivity as the rupture transforms our cultural practices is not, of course, foreseeable in advance but serves, nevertheless, as a powerful ethical goal.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rob Cover: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

References

Agamben, G. (1995). *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and bare life, trans. D. Heller-roazen.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Buchbinder, D. (1994). *Masculinities and identities.* Melbourne: Melbourne Uni Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* London & New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1991). Imitation and gender insubordination. In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (pp. 13–31). London: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of 'sex'.* London & New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life.* London: Verso.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable? London &.* New York: Verso.

Butler, J. (2011). Is judaism zionism? In E. Mendieta, & J. VanAntwerpen (Eds.), *The power of religion in the public sphere* (pp. 70–91). New York: Columbia University Press.

Butler, J. (2015). *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly.* Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press.

Caruth, C. (1995). Recapturing the past. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 151–157). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Connolly, W. E. (1991). *identity/difference: Democratic negotiations of political paradox.* Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press.

Cooper, S. (2000). *Relating to queer theory: Rereading sexual self-definition with irigaray, Kristeva, Wittig and Cixous.* Peter Lang: Bern, 2000.

Cover, R. (2013). Undoing attitudes: Ethical change in the *go Back to where you came from* documentary. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 27*(3), 408–420.

Cover, R. (2019). *Emergent identities: New sexualities, gender and relationships in a digital era.* London & New York: Routledge.

Cover, R. (2020). *Population, mobility and belonging: Understanding population concepts in media, culture and society.* London & New York: Routledge.

Derrida, J. (1995). The rhetoric of drugs, trans. Michael Israel. In E. Weber (Ed.), *Points… Interviews, 1974-1994. Stanford* (pp. 228–254). Calif: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1999). *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, trans. P-A brault and M. Naas.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Duggan, L. (2003). *The twilight of equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics and the attack on democracy.* Boston, Mass: Beacon Press.

Featherstone, M. (2006). Archive. *Theory, Culture & Society, 23*(2–3), 591–596.

Ferrarese, E. (2011). Judith Butler's 'not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition. *Philosophy & Social Criticism, 37*(7), 759–773.

Foucault, M. (2004). In M. Bertani, A. Fontana, & trans D. Macey (Eds.), *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76.* London: Penguin.

Fukuyama, F. (2019). *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition.* London: Profile Books.

Gilson, E. (2011). Vulnerability, ignorance, and oppression. *Hypatia, 26*(2), 308–332.

Gramsci, A. (1971). In Q. Hoare, & G. N. Smith (Eds.), *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, ed. And trans.* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, time and perversion: The politics of bodies.* London & New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. (1979). The great moving right show. *Marxism Today,* 14–20. January.

Hall, D. E. (2004). *Subjectivity.* London & New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, F. (2010). Judith Butler: Disturbance, provocation and the ethics of non-violence. *Humanities Research, 16*(2), 93–115.

Lazzarato, M. (2013). *Governing by debt, trans. J. D. Jordan.* South Pasadena, Calif: Semiotext(e).

Lemke, T. (2011). Biopolitics: An advanced. In *Introduction, trans. E.F. Trump.* New York and London: New York University Press.

Macey, D. (2009). Rethinking biopolitics, race and power in the wake of Foucault. *Theory, Culture & Society, 26*(6), 186–205.

Pugliese, J. (2004). The incommensurability of law to justice: Refugees and Australia's temporary protection visa. *Law and Literature, 16*(3), 285–311.

Sharma, S. (2008). Taxis as media: A temporal materialist reading of the taxi-cab. *Social Identities, 14*(4), 457–464.

Sharma, S. (2013). Critical time. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 10*(2–3), 312–318.

Sharma, S. (2014). Because the night belongs to lovers: Occupying the time of precarity. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 11*(1), 5–14.

Shelley, M. (2004). *The last man*. London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

Urry, J. (2007). *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity.

Woodward, K. (2002). *Understanding identity*. London: Arnold.

Wyn, J., & Woodman, D. (2006). Generation, youth and social change in Australia. *Journal of Youth Studies, 9*(5), 495–514.