

Claire Colebrook | A Remarkable Brain

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Before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic there seemed to be something almost utopian about zoonotic viruses, at least for a certain strand of what has come to be known as 'theory.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari saw the capacity of a virus to jump from one species to another as a way of thinking about life rhizomatically. Rather than a bounded organism that goes through time to realize itself in ever higher forms of life's grandeur, viruses would see life as communicative and open - not open to an outside, for there is no outside other than an ongoing and multiplying proliferation of potential relations:

Evolutionary schemas would no longer follow models of arborescent descent going from the least to the most differentiated, but instead a rhizome operating immediately in the heterogeneous and jumping from one already differentiated line to another. Once again, there is a parallel evolution, of the baboon and the cat; it is obvious that they are not models or copies of each other (a becoming-baboon in the cat does not mean that the cat "plays" baboon). We form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals. ... Always look for the molecular, or even sub-molecular, particle with which we are allied. We evolve and die more from our polymorphous and rhizomatic flus than from hereditary diseases, or diseases that have

their own line of descent. The rhizome is an anti-genealogy.¹

If the rhizome is an anti-genealogy, and *genealogy* is tied to the great state forms of filiation, divine right, authority, and hierarchy, then it would seem that thinking about the force of a virus (as rhizome *par excellence*) would amount to a form of radical relationality: an ungrounded, proliferating, multiplying life of becoming. What happens then when "we" humans *really are* hit with a virus, and our long history of humanist autonomy - being able to travel, plunder, consume and monetize the earth - encounters death and destruction? I think the answer is twofold: it might seem as though a tradition of anti-foundationalist thinking that runs (at least) from Nietzsche to Deleuze and Guattari reaches a real political limit. Life may operate rhizomatically, but affirming the rhizome as a model for thinking an analysis might seem to replicate capitalism's and colonialism's capacity to adapt, migrate, mutate, infiltrate, transform and destroy *without itself having a body one might be able to contain or identify*. The first response to a pandemic might be to hold onto the human, even if this means allowing the state form to assert its authority for now. When Giorgio Agamben spoke out against lockdown procedures as yet one more way in which the state forges itself for the sake of "life," he was seen as typically "theoretical" in his privileging of the freedom of thought over the value of real human lives. The first possibility would be to see the celebration of viroid life as a typically privileged position of theory that seeks to release life from any grounding conception of "man," celebrating a "becoming" that can no longer be deployed by a biopolitical managerialism that would intervene to allow the health of populations to become sovereign. What happens, though, when saving humanity to save the world disrupts a more open and symbiotic conception of life? The answer - months into the virus and its management - is apparent. Agamben was quite right that the lockdown intensified the sovereignty of biopolitical managerialism; but he was also negligent in failing to think rhizomatically, failing to look at what the lockdown measures were achieving *in their specific proliferation*. The whole point of rhizomatic thinking, and of affirming what Keith Ansell-Pearson refers to

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by B. Massumi (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10-11.

as “viroid life”² is not a “flat” negation of “the human”, with a celebration of becoming in general; it is, instead, the challenge to think the composition of “the human” as an event that comes into being by way of mutations, encounters, and stratifications. The 2020 pandemic makes this form of thinking more urgent. The humanity and world that are now being saved by way of lockdown measures came into existence rhizomatically, with the lockdown itself being a rhizomatic event. The virus and various containment and mitigation measures intensified the extent to which the humanity that was being saved came into being through violent relations, encounters, distributions, mutations and invasions. Deleuze and Guattari’s emphasis on a virus jumping from one body to another, transforming as it does so, seems to be rather glib - and almost celebratory - about viral invasion. The point, though, is to see invasion itself as a virus, as something that installs itself, attacking its host - requiring a response that, will in part, have to abandon bodily integrity and suffer in order to live on. Deleuze and Guattari were not alone in using the figure of the virus to think about the individuation of the body. Jacques Derrida also used the figure of immunity, and auto-immunity, to think about a body as always being somewhat at war with itself and its outside in order to maintain itself. Where Deleuze and Guattari differ is that rather than thinking of the body as maintaining itself by way of forces that also threaten the interior, they abandon the walled-in, bounded, integrated body of unity. We are always already viral. What 2020 has exposed is the cartography of “the human”; the world that was being saved by the lockdown relied upon global networks of humans, animals, commodities, affects, images and mutations. What was required to save this world was an intensification of the disposability of some lives, and the increased protection and ongoing “lockdown” of other’s. “Lockdown” was possible and successful for some - those who could rely on Zoom, Instacart, the Uberized economy - while for others “lockdown” amounted to being contained in a poorly paid workplace, exposed to an underfunded healthcare system, and then experiencing poor odds as a result of a history of social relations that had produced communities (predominantly non-white) that suffered poor survival rates because of “underlying conditions.” Nothing demands rhizomatic thinking more than the notion of “underlying” conditions; rather than think

of a body that bears a certain quality, or a body that contracts a condition, we should think of bodies as compositions of multiple responses to their milieu. A body *is* its potentiality, and in the world of pandemics what becomes evident is the production of some bodies as volatile and fragile, at the expense of those other bodies that are walled-in, locked down and, secure in their skin.

The Australian novelist Alexis Wright’s magisterial *Swan Book* uses the figure of the virus to destroy the normative autonomy of the colonizing “man.” All life is viral - made up of nothing more than relations that transform and mutate in their encounters; this is as true of the white invasion of Australia, as it is of Australia’s long history of producing itself as a supposedly multicultural nation only by rendering the bodies it encounters assimilable.

If you want to extract a virus like this from your head - you can’t come to the door of its little old-fashion prairie house with passé kinds of thinking, because the little king will not answer someone knocking, will not come out of the door to glare into the sunlight, won’t talk about anything in level terms, or jump around to appease you like some Chubby Checker impersonator bent over backwards under a limbo stick. Nor will it offer any hospitality - swart summers or not - no matter how much knocking, trick-or-treating, ceremonial presents, or tantrums about why the door was kept closed. I can prove that I have this virus. I have kept the bit of crumpled-up paper, the proper results of medical tests completed by top doctors of the scientific world. They claimed I had a remarkable brain.³

Lockdown. Quarantine. A Land at War, at war with itself. Self-isolation. These twenty-first century events not only have precedents, but are constitutive of who we are. Using the word “we” these days is not smart, even if there are claims that a virus knows no borders, and that - to quote Slavoj Žižek - “we’re all in the same boat now”⁴ (a claim that modifies Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2009 prediction that there would be “no lifeboats for the rich”⁵). The “we” I use is

³ Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 2.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020).

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2

² Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

the “we” made possible by a pre-history of self-isolation, lockdown and quarantine. The way this virus has played out is not at all in the manner of a “China virus,” and is far closer to Alexis Wright’s white virus that seeks to make a land great again: “The virus was nostalgia for foreign things, they said, or what the French say, *nostalgie de la boue*; a sickness developed from channelling every scrap of energy towards an imaginary, ideal world with songs of solidarity, like *We Shall Overcome*.”⁶

Self-isolation: the ideal liberal subject is achieved through lockdown and self-isolation. There has been far too much anti-Cartesian theory in the twentieth century, far too many objections that Descartes’s conception of the self as a distinct substance set apart from extended matter misses the extent to which selves are embodied, connected, and affectively attuned to a world in which they are enmeshed. The problem with pointing out Descartes’s error, is that while the notion of mind as some distinct substance that is cut off from the world may be utterly at odds with the true nature of the world, and might be a terrible way to think about one’s own being, the idea of “the subject” as a distinct substance captures the comportment of liberalism and neoliberalism, and expresses a composition of one’s bodily being that is one of ongoing lockdown and social isolation. Even before social media, dating apps, smart devices and highly personalized forms of media streaming, one can think of the modern, Western, affluent social subject as a distinct center of self-management, for whom the rest of the world - including others - appears as so much data to be managed. In John Rawls’s 1970 *Theory of Justice*, a fair society is imaginable only if I first cut myself off from the world, and then imagine what I would agree to if I happened to occupy any position whatsoever. Well before neoliberalism asks us to treat our own person as a commodity that ought to be maximized for efficiency, with the world around us being nothing more than a marketplace for self-promotion, a history of empire and colonization had forged a myth of the liberal subject as a being whose “humanity” resided in their own private dignity with whatever was beyond the subject being nothing more than material and an opportunity for self-furtherance. Cut yourself off from the world to secure your own being; once that is achieved you may re-encounter

the world as a place of stability and security. When climate change and pandemics threaten that security and self-isolation, the modern subject finds itself in the odd position of having to confront the volatility and instability generated by centuries of subjective lockdown.

Prior to the 2020 pandemic one could already see procedures of isolation and lockdown in response to the climate chaos that had been caused by the centuries of hyper-consumption and hyper-extraction that enabled the modern subject. Post-apocalyptic cinema presents a dystopian future where the human species is split between those who can create pockets of stability amidst a world in disarray, and those who are dispersed and exposed to an utterly volatile planet. That imagined bifurcation in the post-apocalyptic imaginary is merely an intensification of the present, where water, housing, healthcare, education and food are already unevenly distributed. The actual lockdowns and self-isolations of 2020 brought this into even sharper relief. If you happen to be a health worker, homeless, or live in a densely populated urban center with unevenly distributed resources, you are not only not able to shelter in space; you are also at the mercy of the privileged subjects for whom self-isolation is a violation of their economic rights. When the U.S. president tweets that we ought to “Liberate Michigan,” and does so in response to a demonstration where confederate flags were unfurled, it is necessary and easy to dismiss the irresponsible violence of such speech acts. At the same time, it is no less necessary to see that the cause of confederate liberty - a liberty premised on the social death of others - is at the heart of supposedly constitutional freedoms. The unquestioned right to life of the liberal subject was always made possible by isolating from the dangers of a world, along with the outsourcing of risk and death to those who seemed less than human precisely because they did not appear as sovereign liberal subjects who were cut off from the world. When far right groups in the U.S. call for a liberation from lockdown, their manifest civil disobedience really follows from their obedience to a civic space built entirely on the security of the economy at the expense of life. Lockdown and self-isolation have always been part of a world that produces pockets of safety and stability for the privileged few, all the while presenting the hostile milieu outside those pockets of safety as a land of opportunity.

Descartes could not have written his *Meditations* without the preceding centuries of empire and colonization that produced the pri-

(Winter 2009): 197-222.

⁶ Wright, *The Swan Book*, 3.

vate spaces of reading and reflection typical of modern European philosophy. The modern novel that depicts the individual hero making their way in a world that is at once an obstacle and an opportunity, would not have been possible without the production of a private and affluent domestic sphere that was, in turn, enabled by slavery, global plundering, colonization and invasion. Today, the spaces of lockdown and isolation that will supposedly save humanity and the economy for “the” future are at one and the same time sites of privilege and sites of the exposure of an internal insecurity. Some domestic spaces will be scenes of violence and poverty: the smaller your abode and the more exposure and viral load your day-to-day existence brings back into your home, the more your domestic space becomes one of capture rather than security. The more your nation is split between those who have a space for refuge versus those who are homeless, the more conditions of lockdown and self-isolation expose what we ought to have known before the 2020 pandemic, and before the intensifying awareness of climate change: what calls itself humanity has always walled itself off from a world that it stabilized by outsourcing its risk and fragility to those whose lives are not able to shelter in place.

If self-isolation and lockdown typify and make possible the 2020 predicament of shelter-in-place policies, there is also a long pre-history of “our” lands being at war with silent internal enemies. In her masterpiece novel from 2013, *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright describes a closed off brain populated by a malevolent virus that inflicts violence on an outside world:

Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll’s house. Little stars shining over the moon-scape garden twinkle endlessly in a crisp sky. The crazy virus just sits there on the couch and keeps a good old *qui vive* out the window for intruders. It ignores all of the eviction notices stacked on the door. The virus thinks it is the only pure full-blood virus left in the land.⁷

Despite the global systemic collapse, the virus lives on, holding on to its walled off space.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

It was not a virus that forced Australia’s indigenous peoples into forced quarantine. In 2007 the Australian government enacted “The Northern Territory Intervention,” that policed and managed welfare payments to indigenous communities under the pretext of community safety. Despite manifest declarations of apology and reconciliation, the Australian government has not come to terms with the ongoing war it has conducted on the indigenous population. As Rachel Perkins detailed in her 2019 Boyer lectures,⁸ white settlers at one and the same time deemed indigenous peoples to be subjects to the crown, while also waging a war on these people who - as subjects of the crown - could not legally be at war. What was in fact a war was deemed to be an issue of national security. Again, well before the 2020 pandemic, white industrial nations were already at war with themselves, already creating conditions of lockdown and enclosure that distributed security and fragility in a racially divided space. What indigenous writers and thinkers like Wright and Perkins offer for the present is twofold. First, before the 2020 pandemic there was already a political form of autoimmune disease, where a body that declared itself to be humanity secured itself by destroying its “own” populations - populations it would declare to be its own in moments of land seizure and quarantine, but which would be left without water, healthcare or housing. Second, the declared states of emergency that appear at first to be violations of civil liberties are continuations and intensifications of white humanity’s securing of itself in a space of security while the world beyond its bordered ease is deemed to be both volatile, and the proper place for those whose lives are the recipients of outsourced risk. Declarations of states of emergency, along with calls to shelter in place, are not at odds with the neoliberal subject: subjectivity is the effect of a long history of lockdown, self-isolation, and a declared war on internal enemies.

⁸ Rachel Perkins, *The Boyer Lectures 2019: The End of Silence*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2019). <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/the-end-of-silence-part-3/11729624>.