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Escaping/Becoming Subjects: Learning to Work the Boundaries in Boundaryless Work

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This chapter explores the learning processes by which people come both to recognise and constitute their subjectivities at work. Subjectivity is realised through enactment: articulations meshed with the boundaries defining the conditions, activities, geographic locations and positions that they find themselves negotiating in different work environments. Always, subjectivity is produced by power and acted on by power. And usually the subject exercises power, sometimes to resist the very power that is shaping it, but always from within the socio-psychic forces and resources that constitute it. Agency, it is argued here, is articulated in the subject's recognition of both the processes of its own constitution, and of the resources within these processes through which alternate readings and constitutions are tivity, agency finds openings for resistance and subversion of these discourses. In this chapter, the focus is upon so-called 'boundaryless workers', those relying for their income upon a series of contracts with different employers. Drawing from a study of professional workers (nurses and adult educators) in boundaryless employment, the chapter examines their dual movements of constituting subjectivity through both lines of anchorage and lines of flight animating their daily negotiations of tasks, objects, knowledge and relationships. These dual movements of 'escaping/becoming' in work, and the boundary-constitution supporting them, are unlikely to be restricted to contract workers. However, their explicit activities of boundary work help amplify a phenomenon that may well be shared more broadly among workers in the new economy.

In poststructural renderings, the 'subject' is shown to be discursively constituted, malleable, positioned at the intersection of libidinal forces and sociocultural practices (Davies 2000; Hey 2002). There is no

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central authentic 'self' who goes forth with agency and intentionality to author a life of meaning and accomplishment; there are no transcendental centres of consciousness, competence, or freedom. This poststructural denial of the unitary 'sovereign' subject opposes popular literature of workplace learning, much of which in fact is devoted to prescribing technologies of reflection and empowerment to educate worker selves. But these technologies simply produce certain kinds of subjects, argues Rose (1998), invented to serve the new economy well: cheerful seekers of self-reliance, flexible adaptors to changing corporate demands, and devotees to self-improvement. Is there then no escape from this subjection of 'docile bodies' constructed through discourses of globalisation and human capital and workplace structures of flexibility and productivity?

For Foucault, freedom is an exercise on or practice of the self that can be used to control others and govern oneself by taking up available practices in various ways. In different communities, activities and encounters, new subjectivities are made possible by expanding and breaking through habitual positionings, representations and self-regulatory technologies. These breakings-through are not the result of the heroically empowered individual, and in fact are not always transparent to actors, but are occasioned by a complex play of forces within and across their bodies and work. If learning is accepted to be expansion of capacity for 'more sophisticated, more flexible, and more creative action' (Davis et al. 2000), then this work of becoming aware of how one's subjectivity is constituted within these forces, and taking an active role in its constitution, is in fact a learning activity. This understanding is drawn from a view of emergence within nested systems, where cognition, environments and subjects emerge together through 'co-specifying' relationships in joint activity (Fenwick 2001). For Davis et al. (2000), learning is distributed and embedded in action, not centred in an 'individual', but learning is not simply the playing out of action. Learning is recognition, conscious or unconscious, of alternate, more expansive and generative possibilities: a recognition that is articulated *within* action, not outside it.

In this chapter, these ideas are considered in relation to a study of workers who leave organisations to pursue self-employment in what some writers call 'boundaryless work' (Arthur and Rousseau 2000). This tends to consist of a series of contracts for different activities with different employers in different contexts; hence the presumed absence of conventional boundaries defining one's position and place of employment. The discussion here is concerned with understanding how so-called boundaryless workers navigate the difficult and largely unrecognised labour of continuously negotiating their position, and what subjectivities emerge in the process. The dynamic of learning is viewed here as inextricably bound up with these workers' efforts to understand the forces affecting their subjectivities,

and their everyday activities and choices to inhabit a personally tolerable subject position. These choices can be understood at a concrete level as an individual's sense of personal need to 'set boundaries': in their tasks, contexts, expectations, scope of knowledge, and so on. Boundary-setting is a useful trope to capture the work and learning of establishing subjectivity, too: for constitution of subjectivity is an ongoing process of apprehending the boundaries distinguishing *who* one is from who others are. More accurately, this process ought to be characterised as working the boundaries rather than setting them, for particularly in boundaryless work the people and contexts are always changing.

The self-narratives of these boundaryless workers reveal a dual learning process: on the one hand, a realisation of their own fluidity continually escaping the fixed subject positions allotted by workplaces, what Davies (2000) has termed 'lines of flight'; and on the other hand, growing awareness of how their subjectivities become constituted, and their own role in producing these subjects. Freedom is evident in the new practices and spaces of subjectivity that open in their nomadic movements across organisations, knowledges, and working relationships. Therefore, the overall argument here is that these workers' subjectivities resist a subjection to 'docile bodies' constructed through discourses of globalisation and human capital and workplace structures of flexibility and productivity. Boundaryless workers, like all members of society, certainly are shaped in their actions and 'free' choices by these cultural discourses. However, they appear to be sufficiently aware of their position and consciously engaged in constituting it that they may be described as active in learning and working their subjectivity. Moreover, they do not work to produce a coherent narrative of their careers and identities, or an autonomous 'self'. Instead, they appear to flow into and out of structures defining their subject position, immersing in then breaking away from boundaries of knowledge, identity, community, and scope of practice. Amidst this flux can be discerned a central tension, a simultaneous attraction in two conflicting directions: towards becoming and anchoring a bounded subject position, and towards escaping or flying these boundaries.

2.1 Boundaries in 'Boundaryless' Work

Boundaryless work is a term that has been applied to flexible work arrangements ranging from contract employment to home-based teleworking. In this chapter, the particular form of boundaryless work under consideration is 'own-account' self-employment (no employees besides the owner-operator) in which individuals contract their skills to different employers in a variety of contexts. Terminology denoting self-employed

types of boundaryless work become blurry: ‘freelance’, ‘contract’, ‘non-traditional work’ and ‘portfolio work’ as well as ‘self-employment’ appear in career literature addressing this phenomenon. Three common elements that distinguish boundaryless work are (1) a commitment to long-term, rather than temporary freelance employment – as a way of life rather than a ‘stop-gap’ measure; (2) a sense of specialised expertise being developed and offered; and most important, (3) job mobility across multiple employers, erasing conventional boundaries defining one’s job and workplace.

Boundaryless careers have been studied most often in terms of the personal transitions involved (Cohen and Mallon 1999; Gold and Fraser 2002; Sullivan 1999). Particular interest has centred on boundaryless workers’ career identity. How individuals ‘construct non-organisationally sustained accounts of their working lives’ is a focus for Gold and Fraser (2002:583), who examined boundaryless workers’ strategies for successful transition. But within critical circles, those concerned about the effects of ‘flexibilisation’ argue that such conditions are repressive (Garrick and Usher 2000). People whose jobs are declared redundant are forced to compete with others for each piece of work, sometimes from their former employers, adapting to the organisation’s unpredictable needs without income protection or benefits. Further, individuals’ desires for personal meaning and fulfilment are enrolled in ways that support flexible work. They may accept the popular rhetoric that the responsibility for their precarious career is their own, and that it is natural and inevitable that they must be entrepreneurial, marketing their own knowledge and labour, in what du Gay (1996) called ‘an enterprise of the self’.

Overall as Smeaton (2003) summarises, the literature on general self-employment presents two opposing models of these conditions. One is a ‘liberation’ perspective that boundaryless work offers creativity and freedom from constrictive bureaucratic structures. The other is a marginalised perspective of boundaryless workers as exploited, unwillingly shunted from their jobs, and encouraged to view their resulting isolation as an empowering opportunity for which they must take responsibility. Those viewing it positively include Arthur and Rousseau (2000), who argue that boundaryless work has revolutionised employment. Boundaryless workers are supposedly mobile and active in designing their careers, exhilarated, able to enjoy personal meaning and personal responsibility for their work (Sullivan 1999), while contributing to continuous knowledge production (Bird 1996). Because such independent workers tend to form multiple networks, argue Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996), they enable wide distribution of learning across social groups and institutions. They project a positive social vision comprising multiple nodes of learning, and multiple connections among people, tools and environments created

through the unconstrained knowledge and unbound identities of boundaryless labour (Gee et al. 1996).

However, studies of self-employment have also highlighted its exploitive and damaging potential. Mirchandani (2000) shows the oppression resulting from blurred lines between home, family and work in home-based self-employment, which tends to dominate boundaryless careers. Sullivan (1999) reports risk-filled challenges posed by the boundaryless career, such as crossing boundaries between organisations and occupations, and creating new vocational identities. Critics argue that such flexible work merges subjectivities with the new capitalism. Individuals are required – indeed seduced to desire – to engage in a lifelong human resource project of self alteration, through reflexive self-assessment, shape-shifting and self-marketing, to adapt to organisations' changing need (Fenwick 2004). In their study of freelance translators, Gold and Fraser (2002) conclude:

> Transitions into portfolio work involve an anxious period during which organisational support dissolves and is replaced by the individual's own resources, skills, networks and entrepreneurial abilities, sustained only by a range of safety nets, such as savings, the support of a working partner and personal contacts. (p.594)

Yet Smeaton (2003) finds, from her analysis of three UK employment surveys, that the 'marginalisation' critique has overstated or distorted the views of the (boundaryless) self-employed. She found that they reject the possibility of returning to full (boundaried) employment and exhibit higher levels of satisfaction than employed workers: 'this form of freedom engenders heightened self esteem and work satisfaction even when self-exploitation in the form of long hours exists' (p.389). However, sufficient questions have been raised about the differential benefits of boundaryless work that the question of whether it offers more progressive or repressive work conditions remains ambivalent. As Billett pointed out, in 'boundaryless' work individuals' learning and labour is directed to generating their own boundaries for work conditions and subjectivity, and these boundaries can become more rigid than the spaces available within 'boundaried' work (personal communication, 27 January 2006). Learning for boundaryless workers is an enterprise of self-regulation and self-discipline (Hanson and Hagström 2003).

2.2 Understanding Subjectivity

Within this ambivalence, the questions at issue here have to do with what subjectivities are created in this boundaryless work, and what (learning) processes are involved in their constitution. And what is a subject? In

conventional Cartesian ontology, the subject has been construed as a self: an autonomous individual who has constructed or discovered an enduring inner personhood, distinct from others, and embarked upon a self-actualising project of developing its full capacity and agency. Feminist and poststructural writers, however, have debunked this unitary, universal self, showing that it cannot easily be disentangled from the web of relationships, meanings and social practices in which it moves and speaks, and from the multiple identity roles and changes that any one person inhabits. As Butler (1992:13) writes, the 'subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process.' The agency of the subject lies in its ongoing constitution. Agency is articulated in the subject's recognition of both the processes of its own constitution, and of the resources within these processes through which alternate readings and constitutions are possible. Working from within discourses constituting subjectivity, agency finds openings for resistance and subversion of these discourses.

So subjectivity is not about 'the self'; nor is subjectivity synonymous with identity. Identity is an image, a symbolic code representing something the subject desires to belong to or possess: to identify with. The subject strives to perform an identity or various identities. Identity is ultimately a representation or mental conception that we ascribe to ourselves and to others:

> our *conception* of who we are, our identity, is constituted by the power of all of the discursive practices in which we speak in which in turn 'speak'; us. (Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant and Yates 2003, p.41) [italics added]

Some suggest that the striving to perform this or that identity, compelled by desire for identification with an object, position, community or ideal, is driven by our ubiquitous lack of identity. Further, in our desire for unity, stability and continuity, we invent a monolithic, coherent even sedentary story of 'self', a Me, based on our consciousness and remembrance of identities we have inhabited and performed. Taylor (1989) links this drive with a desire to define and reach the good based on moral ideals of self-mastery and self-control. The result is a turn to reflexivity:

> The turn to oneself is now also and inescapably a turn to oneself in the first person perspective – a turn to the self as self. That is what I mean by radical reflexivity. Because we are so deeply embedded in it, we cannot but search for reflexive language. (p.175)

This turn to the 'self', with accompanying practices of self-improvement and self-control, energised by a drive for identity, is increasingly viewed as an important phenomenon by researchers of flexible

work. Drawing from Giddens' theory of reflexive selves, Brocklehurst (2003) suggests that boundaryless work demands self-construction which depends upon a sense of place: when geographic organisational boundaries are removed individuals are driven to somehow create the boundaries that enable their very existence.

Contemporary views of the subject concur that it is always in motion, and constantly produced in time and space. Subjectivity has no existence, per se, but is continually constituted and resignified. The subject is derived from and subjugated to practices and cultural discourses, including practices of identification and images of identity available in the (limited phallogocentric) cultural discourses. It is conjured into presence and then moves according to how it is positioned in joint activity, its encounters with others, and the gaze of these others – as well as the limits and desires of its own corporeality. Always, subjectivity is produced by power and acted on by power. And usually the subject exercises power, sometimes to resist the very power that is shaping it, but always from within the socio-psychic forces and resources that constitute it. This is

> …subjectivity without a centre of origin, caught in meanings, positioned in the language and narratives of the culture. The self cannot know itself independently of the significations in which it is enmeshed.… Meanings are always in play and the self, caught up in this play, is an ever changing self. (Usher, Bryant and Johnson 1997:103)

In the accelerated global competition and unstable, flexible employment conditions of the new capitalism, these meanings are hardly benign. Rose (1998) analysed the new subject of work as 'a complex territory to be explored, understood and regulated' (p.56) through 'engaging the employee with the goals of the company at the level of his or her subjectivity' (p.56). Individuals regulate their own subjectivities through a suite of technologies, such as career discourses, modelled images of the good worker/learner, surveillance, mentoring and other explicit guidances within particular social and political contexts. These are wedded to individuals' own desires for control, belonging, and so forth to produce their desires to become particular subjects desired by the organisation. Thus, subjection to production and efficiency continues but through complex psychological means governing how subjects move, speak and manage their own movements and speech. In an age celebrating entrepreneurial, risk-taking, self-responsible workers, the new subjectivities are expected to pursue meaningful work and autonomous careers through 'choices' in a biographical project of self-actualisation.

This governed view of worker subjectivity as passive, discursive and utterly dependent upon cultural regulation of its own choices is overly

deterministic, argues Casey (2003), and besides, people's behaviors and resistances at work refute the analysis. For Casey, subjectivation is the process by which one becomes an acting, self-creating subject in work, achieved through the will to act and be recognised as an actor (p.629). Devos (2005), too, in analyzing the subjectivities produced through workplace mentorship, draws upon Foucault's later work on subjectivity and McLaren's (2002) dialogue with this work to develop a feminist theory of an active subject. Subjects are produced through a 'complex process of subjectification in which the subject subjects herself but in so doing demonstrates her autonomy and her agency. She is the active self-constituting subject' (Devos 2005:123). The subject is still relational, formed in specific social, historical and cultural practices and relationships: but as it emerges, so emerges the subject's capacity to exercise political and moral agency. That is, within the fields of power and knowledge producing subjects, individuals choose among various diverse possibilities of behavior and self-enunciation in the process of this production. These choices, of course, as Rose (1999) has pointed out, do not float freely in some unconstrained bubble outside cultural discourses, but are actively shaped by the discursive, material, and libidinous conditions afforded by the context.

But to avoid sliding back into that seductive notion of subject as 'the individual' that still emerges, despite our recognition of its influence by cultural contexts and relational activity, as the agentic ultimately autonomous self, we need to examine more closely the interaction of subjectivity, agency and action. I turn here to Zizek, who conceives subjectivity within the continuous flux of action without dissolving the subject's political agency. Drawing from Hegel, Badiou, Althusser, Butler and Lacan, Zizek shows that the disparate chaotic flux of reality *becomes* events, meaningful actions, and possibilities – a 'positive objective order' – precisely through the intervention of the subject:

> The 'subject' is the *act*, the *decision* by means of which we pass from positivity of the given multitude to the Truth-Event and/or to Hegemony… 'Subject' is not a name for the gap of freedom and contingency that infringes upon the ontological order, active in its interstices; rather, 'subject' *is* the contingency that grounds the very positive ontological order, that is, the vanishing 'mediator' whose self-effacing gesture transforms the pre-ontological chaotic multitude into the semblance of a positive 'objective' order of reality. (Zizek 1999:158)[1]

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[1] Thus neither hegemony nor truth derive directly from any ontological set, but depend on the subject's action. A 'Truth-Event' is precise political experience bearing (signifiable and ideological) Truth for those engaged in it. Multitude may be considered the chaotic excess of the situation(s) from which the experience derives.

In this gesture, this act, the subject also comes into presence. Zizek cautions that this conception does not presume an ontological gap of contingency waiting to be filled by the subject's action. Rather, 'the subject is both the opening or Void which precedes the gesture of subjectivisation, as well as the gesture itself.... the subject's very endeavour to fill in the gap retroactively sustains and generates this gap' (p.159).

Hence, subjectivity becomes a space of possibilities. A subject is realised at the same time as a recognisable event. This realisation occurs through the subject's act or choice intervening in the multitude of symbols, technologies, ideas and activity available in that moment. This choice does not originate from outside this multitude, but is made available from a range of possibilities within it: from the tightly prescribed and oppressive, to the subversive and resistant. Power presumes counter-power. The subject's agency, the freedom that can be exercised within the action choice birthed in an event, is the recognition of possibilities that can rupture preceding hegemonies and sealed significations to engender the unexpected, the creative, the emergent.

2.3 Studying Boundaryless Work

The ensuing discussion of subjectivity in boundaryless work is based on a study which set out to explore the unique rewards and challenges of this work through the narrated experiences of self-employed individuals who contract their services to various organisations and clients. In-depth interviews were conducted in 2002–2003 with 31 men and women based in Canadian cities representing west coast, prairies, and central Canada. Participants were recruited from two general occupational areas: nurses (13), and adult educators (18), chosen because so many of their numbers were affected by job closures in the 1990s recession in Canada. The two occupational areas present very different tasks, contexts and client types to enrich a comparison of boundaryless work experiences. Nursing is highly regulated and unionised. The nurse participants provided clinical services (i.e. foot care, palliative care) and consulting (i.e. sexual health consulting, public health education holistic health care, sports health). Adult educators led training, leadership and programme development, evaluation, and organisational change. About half of all participants were contracted mostly with organisations, and half mostly with individuals (e.g. providing personal services like foot care).

Both groups were somewhat homogeneous in their economic and race privilege: all portfolio nurses but one and all but three portfolio adult educators were white. All enjoyed at least a moderately comfortable

income, and were 'mid-life' ranging in age from mid-thirties to mid-fifties. Most were well educated. Adult educators all held graduate degrees. Among nurses, eight held a Bachelor of Science, two held graduate degrees, and three held a nursing diploma. Thus, many participants in these two groups enjoyed a degree of mobility and social and cultural capital, though gender issues such as work-family balance were evident.

All participants had moved into portfolio work from employment in a small or large organisation. All claimed that they had freely chosen the form of self-employment here called boundaryless work. Their reasons are consistent with those described in self-employment literature, including 'push' motives (i.e. frustration with repressive organisational structures or difficulty finding full-time employment in their preferred practice), 'pull' motives (i.e. desires for flexible work schedules, freedom from supervision, or urge to create a personal practice), or a push-pull combination (Cohen and Mallon 1999). However, it is by now well-recognised that the notion of 'choice' is problematic, and may more accurately represent received cultural discourses emphasising individuals' responsibility for their own conditions than an individual's exercise of agency. Even though some of the interviewees here may have believed they freely chose to leave employment, they may in fact have had little choice in cases where work conditions were intolerable, no full-time work was available, or future staff cuts were inevitable.

Over half of the participants alluded to feelings of restlessness, seeking new challenges after working a few months or years in one place or type of employment. Yet amidst this apparent need for contingency, they also claimed to need a stable focus. This dynamic has been described elsewhere (Fenwick 2003): it seems driven partly by business purposes, to clarify a niche and build long-lasting relationships with particular clients, and partly by personal need for a sense of place, identity, security and boundaries defining one's life and work in the fluidity of boundaryless work. These two desires – for resilient, often intentional career contingency and for focus and stability – appeared to exist simultaneously as a central tension in the work and subjectivities of boundaryless workers (Fenwick 2004). Further, they experienced related internal conflicts *within* the most positive dimensions of boundaryless work. One was the work design element of portfolio work, involving negotiating boundaries in the structure, process, standards, environment and content of their work activities. Another conflicted area was client relations, requiring boundaries delineating credibility, reciprocity and mutual expectation to sustain relationships with multiple clients. In both of these areas, boundaryless workers talked of experiencing both freedom and repression simultaneously.

2.4 Working the Boundaries

To illustrate specific dynamics of negotiating or 'working the boundaries' in work and subjectivity, this section will describe briefly the experiences of two individuals in boundaryless work. Each case illustrates the sorts of work tasks, conditions and difficulties expressed more broadly among the participants in nursing and adult education, respectively. Catherine is a registered nurse practicing home nursing foot care in coastal British Columbia for both individual clients and institutions of long-term care. Brad is an adult educator offering workshops, university teaching and organisational development in urban Alberta.

Catherine began private practice as a homecare nurse in 1995 after her own children were in school. A former hospital nurse, she was firm about not wanting to go back to 'all the politics, all the union stuff' and the rigid shifts and patient overloads of hospital work. More important, she wanted to rediscover good nursing:

> In the facility I wasn't giving good patient care, I was giving out their pills and doing the paper work but I didn't have time to talk to them, I used to turn my back sometimes if I saw a patient walking down the corridor… I've got six dressings to do and I've got to start the ten o'clock meds and it's already nine thirty and I've got four doctors' orders to process and I haven't got time to stop and just talk to somebody.

So she deliberately rejected a subject position that Catherine characterised as 'pushing pills and paper' and created a practice where 'I give good patient care … most of it is one-on-one … I feel like I'm really connecting with people, I feel ethically good about my work at the end of the day.' Yet, Catherine juggles constantly. Boundaries of time that construct a typical day of work do not fit individual patients' needs for nursing care, which revolve around their waking and mealtimes. Home nurses are often required suddenly, at unpredictable hours that interrupt family and personal time. Catherine has teamed with others to construct work-time boundaries (4-hour shifts for each) to solve the problem, but she still retains sufficient control over these to escape when she wants to or allow herself more time with particular patients. Eventually she consolidated herself as a foot care specialist to arrange more predictable work patterns and more variation in clients.

Boundaries defining knowledge and scope of practice are another issue. Like other independent nurses, Catherine referred disparagingly to and tried to distance herself from the 'medical' model of knowledge, which she believed was fragmented and sometimes contradicted real healing. Yet her license to practice, her credibility and her very sense of

evidence-based knowledge depended on this ‘medical model’. Nurses providing home care may face a patient with multiple medical problems for which they are not licensed to practice. Some require immediate attention; some are unwilling or unable to seek a doctor: the nurse is often torn about her ethic of care. Further, boundaries defining the health care system used to mean that private nurses had difficulty gaining entrance into hospitals. Specific areas of practice, such as foot care nursing, require special certificates and overlap medical practice (such as podiatry) in ambiguous ways that can create conflict over boundaries of knowledge and practice. Catherine’s tales of navigating all of these boundary issues revealed above all a sense of continually re-creating her practice, escaping structures she dislikes while anchoring her subjectivity in pride of good nursing.

Brad entered self-employment in 1991 after 10 years as a mid-level manager in a government agency. He offers seminars, research and consulting services to organisations in worker learning and management development. His work, he believes, is inherently about finding and stretching boundaries: ‘I tend to work on the edges … that is, pushing the boundaries of what is possible, seeking new approaches, challenging what is.’

This work is supplemented with sessional contracts to two universities to provide instruction in graduate courses. In boundaryless work, Brad explained, one needs to invent an identity or ‘brand’ that clients recognise: a specialised knowledge to market: ‘How do you know who’s out there who needs you? How are you going to communicate that? Are you going to wait for them to ask? Are you going to have a business card? A brochure? … “This is who I am and what I’m offering … if you’ve got this question you need me.”‘

This is the work of constituting a subject position. Yet the knowledge clients want shifts over time: Brad’s specialties shifted accordingly from change management, to executive coaching, to future search scenarios: he ‘re-branded’ or re-invented himself, with new certificates and language, according to what he wanted to do that would sell. Sometimes he shifted because he had become tired of a particular area of practice: ‘I get bored easily’. Like other boundaryless workers, Brad claimed to thrive on the exhilaration of continual change, and positioned his work to escape routine, repetition and structure: “I hope to have an impact and to add value. But it is arm’s length enough that I can observe and touch and hear and feel the sort of social and power systems without being drawn into them, or choosing not to be drawn into … the entanglements.”

Yet this shifting must be balanced with a grounding focus or anchor. Clear boundaries defining a specific knowledge and practice, even if temporary, are important to avoid stretching oneself too thin and to sharpen one’s image as a valuable specialist. The trick is not getting stuck

in this image. Meanwhile in the university contracts he conducted, his knowledge credibility depended on different sources entirely. In fact, Brad was finishing a PhD not because he wanted university employment but to improve his position: he was tired of being treated ‘like a second-class citizen, an outsider’ when teaching university courses.

Working these boundaries demarcating insiders and outsiders in organisations is labour-intensive, and exposes the forces constituting various subjectivities. Brad observed that as an ‘outsider’ he could often see the connections and bottlenecks, the prejudices and conflicts, that shaped subjectivities and their positions within an organisation. Yet, constituting his own position was tricky. A contractor like himself was expected to fly in and out of an organisation to fix a problem without requiring office space, induction, supervision or formal connection to its structures such as information flow. Yet, he was also expected to become part of the community, accepted and trusted by other staff, despite his invisibility. And because Brad, like many boundaryless workers, balanced multiple contracts in various sites and cities, his subjectivities shifted day to day. Brad explicitly talked about the contradictory pulls he experienced. After a day of energising planning with a great team, they all went out for a drink while he returned to a hotel room to prepare for the next day in an entirely different site and role: ‘the loneliest place in the world’. Brad grounded his subjectivity in pushing others to become aware of their boundaries, to find new connections and solve their problems, but he continually made choices to escape entrenchment in the organisational tangles that he felt subjugated people.

2.5 Learning Subjectivity

Trinh Minh Ha (1991) wrote that

> what is at stake is a practice of subjectivity that is still unaware of its own constituted nature … unaware of its own continuous role in the production of meaning … unaware of representation as representation …and finally unaware of the ‘Inappropriate Other’ within every ‘I’. (p.77)

The point of understanding what subjectivities are produced in work and through what process is ultimately, for me, towards opening opportunities for people to become aware of how their subjectivities are constituted, and to recognise how their own acts produce both their roving subject positions and the events in which they are implicated. This awareness is a learning process. It is in effect learning to refuse subjection to the

apparent inevitability of the global 'knowledge economy' with all its injustices and new demands, and learning to reclaim some political agency in the organisation and activities of work. Those who argue that such political agency is only possible through the solidarity of collective struggle (e.g., organised labour) exclude all those who labour in proliferating forms of boundaryless work. To ignore these forms is to deny the changing structures of work and to leave unchallenged its regimes of truth and subjectification. Conversely, the awareness of subjectivity and the power of the subject's act breaks free from liberal encouragements of self-reflection, which reduce the subject's power and imagination to action upon and improvement of the self.

Among boundaryless workers, such as those participating in the study described here, there is not evidence of this clinging to a disciplined/regulated self that ultimately diminishes one's awareness of the whole and one's sphere of possibilities for action. Yet boundaryless workers are actively constructing trajectories and boundaries for their careers and identities. The longer they are at it, the more comfortable they seem with their fluidity of their knowledge and position, a fluidity that seems to free them from career discourses of upward mobility. They become used to breaking into and out of self-representations, disciplinary technologies, and subjugating knowledge regimes. In doing so, they fashion their own boundaries defining their tasks and practices, their movement and position within work communities, and ultimately the meaning and scope of their work. They also confront regularly the question of what boundaries comprise the knowledge that emerges in their work and the identities for which they are recognised. They seem able to articulate the different subject positions they inhabit, and those they intentionally reject. Identity is an image that they play with, understanding its strategic construction and management for purposes of marketing as well as survival within organisations. Because they are compelled to confront or create boundaries all the time, 'boundaryless' workers appear conscious of their own continuous role in the production of their subjectivities as well as the activity networks in which they participate. They actively constitute boundaries, stretch them, ignore them, duck and escape them.

These dynamics, exposed by the heightened conditions of flexibility and identity-invention in which so-called boundaryless workers enact subjectivity, likely are not terribly different to those articulated by many workers. As pointed out by Casey, Edwards and Nicoll, and Billett and Smith (this volume), in these new times manufacturing flexible learning worker-subjects, people find all sorts of contradictory places for disruption, avoidance, and compliance. This magnification of boundaryless work serves to throw into relief an interesting dynamic that perhaps can be seen more broadly. That is, in working all of the boundaries of

organisational discourses and expectations, self-representations, shifting tasks and meanings of work, workers may occupy apparently contradictory subject positions at once. As this case of boundaryless workers shows, people attempt to both anchor or ground their subjectivity as an ontological structure apart from the flux of everyday, constantly present action; and they escape free from any ontological structures that threaten to capture and pin their contingency: organisational routines, occupational identities, even notions of a fixed self. Whether these two directions are held together in tension or enacted in oscillation or other mutual interaction is hard to determine and perhaps irrelevant. The important point is that part of this learning for all workers involves developing awareness of and strategies for constituting subjectivity in ways that both ensure some sense of continuity as well as new subjective possibilities that are not passive subjection.

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