

CHAPTER 10

WRITING TO HAVE NO FACE: THE ORIENTATION OF ANONYMITY IN TWITTER

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I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.

—Foucault

Foucault isn't the only one. This chapter is a story about how I wrote to have no face; it is my anonymity story. Late in 2011, I became fascinated by the Guy Fawkes/pirate flag avatars that I saw all over social media. Who were these people behind the mask? Why did they choose to show themselves online as this figure? And, what motivated them to protest online? The answers to these questions inspired me to study the online protest rhetoric of Anonymous through a developing research methodology I detail in this chapter.

The methodology has shaped my research practices as a rhetoric and writing scholar. In order to study anonymity, I had to study Anonymous. One cannot be separated from the other, not on the Internet. However, with studying Anonymous came great risk.

It meant the recurrence of an unmarked van parked down my street. It meant hearing strange clicks through my phone receiver every time I made or accepted a call. It meant my Internet going down, usually mid-conversation in a chat with my research participants. It meant [still] being intrusively checked by TSA every time I flew anywhere for work. It meant worrying that I could be doxxed by someone on social media and have my private personal information exploited—an incident that happened in the summer of 2012 when a particularly talented hacker from within the Anonymous community found out the name and location of my son's school, which he used as information collateral to threaten another person in the community. I was terrified, angry, and confused. At the time, I had no idea why studying Anonymous meant a continual lesson of how

to keep my information private and why anonymity is so important, especially for researchers who work in online communities.

Despite these lived risks, this experience also taught me why some choose anonymity online and what anonymous identities afford users in social media spaces. I have made many life-long connections by joining the larger Anonymous community and those acquainted with others around it. I learned what it means to do research with vulnerable participants who are very much also at risk—some of whom are serving sentences, or worse, today.

And, most of all, I learned the importance of telling my story about anonymity.

A METHODOLOGY FOR EMBODYING ANONYMITY

I open this chapter with an explanation of the repercussions I experienced as a way of guiding you into how my scholarship on anonymity has unfolded. My purpose is to show that at no point in my research was my body separated from my work. Who I am online as an academic has inseparably connected my body with other bodies. Additionally, the dichotomy between online and offline bears no relation to my lived reality as a scholar or as a person. The bodies I inhabited in Twitter to study anonymity cannot be quantified within a unified, single theory of identity or selfhood.

A methodology capable of addressing anonymous embodiment starts from Sara Ahmed's (2006) discussion of orientations in *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed explained that "bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the co-habitation of sharing space" (p. 54). My methodology begins with Ahmed's focus on orientation. By theorizing orientation as a spatial relationship between bodies, the selves around one's body (in all their identifiable forms) provide context for us to theorize how our own body takes shape. Cohabitation, then, centers theorizing of the relationships between bodies as collaborative. The orientations of anonymous bodies with other bodies shape one another, but also shape their communal social landscape together.

Within this methodology of anonymous embodiment, I rely on the combination of feminist and queer rhetorical practices as tactics. Because I am specifically working with autoethnographic data from my own rhetorical performances of identity in Twitter, I primarily theorize the way I came to embody anonymity through the deployment of tactical strategies for activism acquired from my disciplinary knowledge as a rhetorician. In this chapter, I employed two specific tactics as methods for doing my work: *strategic contemplation* and *chusmeria*.

Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch (2012) defined the term *strate-*

gic contemplation in order to reclaim a genre of scholarly practice that emphasizes meditation and reflection as a heuristic (p. 84). Strategic contemplation reorients us as academics to cultural practices that exist within our space of research. As I reflect on the various re-compositions of myself in Twitter, I participate in the reclaiming of this genre of scholarly practice. Royster and Kirsch asserted that we need to reflect on the experiences and sensations of our bodies that are relevant to the research we are doing and contemplate them at every step of our project (p. 95). They provided me a new way—an embodied feminist way—of approaching the work I do as an academic. As I began applying this approach to my own study of anonymity, I better understood the experience of becoming anonymous by contemplating it as a scholarly body I needed to inhabit. I was able to use strategic contemplation in this chapter to reflect on anonymous embodiment as a tactic that infuses my work with practical meaning. Such practical meaning takes shape as I reflected on the relationship my body had *in* Twitter.

Through strategic contemplation, I am able to reflect on how what my body had undergone in Twitter—as revolutions of various Twitter selves—resembled a model of identity theorized by José Esteban Muñoz (1999). Muñoz explained that *chusmeria* is a practice of embodiment that blends exaggerated antinormative and inappropriate behaviors with professional, normative ones to “spoil” an identity construction (pp. 184-185). He defined *chusmeria* as “a tactical refusal to keep things ‘pristine’ and binarized, a willful mismatching of striped and floral print genres, and a loud defiance of a rather fixed order” (p. 191). *Chusmeria*, as a rhetorical tactic with Latina/o Caribbean roots, allows a Spanish-speaking Caribbean identity to resist being defined (and even defiled) by hegemonic power; it is the embodiment of a Latina/o queer performativity that provokes confusion and even discomfort from its audience. The tactic of *chusmeria* explains how I navigated the blending of my own clashing identities in Twitter. As a queer, light-skinned (Mexican) Latinx, I live by mitigating such navigation anyway. I am fascinated by how this navigation shifted into embodied performances of my selves in Twitter while I was doing academic research.

TWITTER AS A PLACE FOR EMBODIMENT

I chose Twitter as my location of study because I was socially located there when I began doing my research. Everyday interactions within that space permitted me to notice my experiences with identity boundaries blurring—unfolding constantly anew—in real, living time. When I joined Twitter in 2009, I immediately felt the possibility for interaction with anyone. Upon logging in, I was opted into following news organizations and celebrities. I unfollowed most of them once I realized that I could find and follow people who discussed topics more in

line with my interests. At the time, I was an English literature senior studying literary theory, struggling with theorists such as Derrida and Foucault. A simple search for people discussing these Western thinkers brought me to three men discussing them in detail. I followed them, then started “listening” to their conversation. After some time, I joined them as a fellow educated conversant.

The friendship with these men and many others taught me that Twitter operates differently than other social networks I inhabit. I recall Michael Warner’s (2005) statement that “a public is a relation among strangers” (p. 75). The public space of Twitter has a distinct emphasis on connecting strangers with one another. Twitter does not differ much from online social spaces like Instagram or Tumblr in its abilities to provide opportunities to meet strangers. However, Twitter has distinct differences that make it representative of a public where identities converge to converse. The main difference between Twitter and other online spaces is Twitter’s timeline. Though many social media technologies have timelines where users scroll through posts written by people they follow in real time, Twitter’s timeline surpasses others in sheer pace. The Twitter timeline runs fast, relying on the speech of news and events for acceleration. The temporal materiality in its timeline conforms conversation to the fixed structure of seconds, minutes, hours, and days. Twitter makes news go viral like no social space we have today. Most of the speech of virality depends upon the number of people Twitter users follow.

For instance, my main Twitter account currently follows upward of over 800 Twitter users. I cannot keep up with every post in my timeline, so I have adjusted my experience with Twitter by using lists where I sort this account’s friends from news and research. Lists allow me to connect with the people I follow in uniquely specific ways based upon my relationships with them. To return to Ahmed, I have adjusted my orientations in Twitter to the people in my community and these orientations shape my interactions with them. I will explain this further in the sections that follow.

Comparing the algorithmic allowances for identity in Twitter to those in Facebook illuminates the technical function of anonymity in Twitter. Facebook has a history of not accepting—even downright opposing—people who present nontraditional identities to use its service. In the fall of 2014, Facebook received mainstream criticism for deleting accounts belonging to drag queens who did not present as their given names. It even requires users to submit state-issued identification as proof their names are *their* names. Such blatant opposition to giving users the right to select the names they present in their own accounts makes Facebook an unsafe, inhospitable place for people who live on the margins of traditional heteronormativity. And it also grants its users little control over their own information, which is devastating for people with personal reasons that require they retain a sense of privacy. In contrast, Twitter does not

require ID to use its service. Twitter prioritizes connection not as a relationship with people users already know, but as a relationship with people and organizations who say something users want to hear. Twitter's digital architecture revolves around a communal desire for shared, global conversation with strangers and friends alike. And it remains special for being one of the few places on the Internet where identity play is not only possible, but accepted.

Like other online social spaces such as Tumblr and Instagram, Twitter users can choose their name to be [nearly] whatever they want. These names follow the @ symbol and can be anything from their given names, aliases, or even names made of combined letters and numbers that are otherwise unpronounceable. People can choose to present themselves as a character, a parody account, an inanimate object, anonymous, or even pseudonymous. The nominal choices are nearly infinite in Twitter, making for a unique temporal user experience with anonymity in ways that even spaces like Tumblr and Instagram do not quite match, which is what I use this chapter to explain.

WHAT'S THE IDENTITY IN A NAME?



**Kill your face. lose your ID. Divest
your Self of the burden of identity.
I, like you, am #anonymous and I
will never die.**

3/22/12, 20:18

Figure 10.1. How to kill your face (wordymcwriter).

I first began studying Twitter having no idea what I was beginning would turn into a serious scholarly practice. During the fall of 2011, I was there studying how the Occupy Wall Street movement used this space to perform social activist rhetoric (for more conversation on Occupy, Caroline Dadas has an excellent chapter about the movement's hashtag activism in this collection). I kept coming across Twitter accounts using pseudonyms, alternate identities, and avatars with Guy Fawkes masks. I wondered why people were electing to *not be* themselves in this space and what these alternative representations meant within and outside of Twitter.

That was when I came across Bertolt Brecht's (1996) use of dialectical materialism for his Marxist analysis of theatre. My wondering helped me form theory-based questions about how the construction of our selves online visually reflects our social relationships. Brecht employed dialectical materialism as a performance method to help his characters project their social situations as processes. He felt that

[dialectical materialism] regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. This also goes for those human feelings, opinions, and attitudes through which at any time the form of men's life together finds its expression. (p. 122)

By emphasizing change as a natural orientation among social relationships, Brecht explained how the desires and drives collectively constitute our material bodies. Pathos is not merely a second-rate subjectivity to Brecht, but a valid orientation that connects us with one another through sharing our histories.

Brecht's theoretical approach taught me what dialectical materialism means in regard to Twitter avatars. I turned critically to my own Twitter account to question how I was employing pathos in my visual representation of self. Some time has passed since this self-critique began. I have further evaluative distance to strategically rhetoricize the transitions my Twitter account underwent.

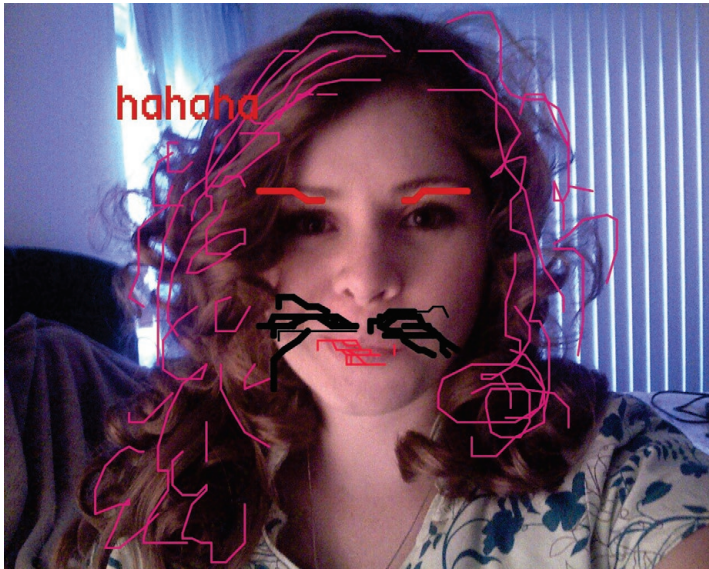


Figure 10.2. Avatar transitions of the original @LesHutch Twitter account (#1).



Figure 10.3. Avatar transitions of the original @LesHutch Twitter account (#2).

Each picture in Figures 10.2, 10.3, and 10.4 served as an avatar for different iterations of my original Twitter account. The first photograph represented @LesHutch's Twitter identity in 2009—an image composition of me going to work at the emergency room (my career prior to academia), wearing scrubs, and with stylized artifice drawn over the image thanks to a nifty photo app. @LesHutch's avatar shows me playing with my identity even then, though I still held a name closely resembling my given name. Through strategic contemplation now, I see that I clearly held an understanding that identity play through self-presentation was possible in Twitter. The way I played with my identity then signals Twitter as a place where I felt comfortable not taking myself too seriously.

The next photograph marks a transition I made after three years on Twitter. This was one of the avatars I had once I started studying Occupy Wall Street and had connected more with activists and anonymous individuals. I had changed my name to @LesHeme, a writing alias I have used in the past. I adopted this name to distance my account from my “real” identity in an effort to protect my son's. Ironically, @LesHeme's avatar, arguably, more closely resembles my face than the one preceding it. It appears to be nearly all me. But it isn't. @LesHeme's avatar was photo manipulated from an original. One of my Twitter friends offered to put her in sepia with a light rose blush imposed upon it. This friend altered this image to celebrate one of my tweets making over fifty retweets. I wore this avatar to project some semblance of “classic beauty,” while maintaining a sense of sass; at the time, this was true to the me I chose to present.



Figure 10.4. Avatar transitions of the original @LesHutch Twitter account (#3).

To symbolize my first full detachment from myself, the last photograph of this incarnation stands in for the final name change this account had: @tumblesweed. Capturing me sitting on the sand at Dog Beach, California, wearing sunglasses on a day off from school and work, this avatar again represented a true representation of a form of myself. @tumblesweed’s avatar is simultaneously Leslie Hutchinson and a person I cannot be anywhere else. In a way, she represents me in an idealized form.

Yet @tumblesweed contradicts a normative visual narrative of “realness.” She rejected any affiliation with my nominal self; she was the end-stop of @LesHutch’s identity. @tumblesweed was someone I was not fully able to be in my “real life.” Rather, I became her in order to embody anonymity for my research. @tumblesweed *blended* my personal identity with a scholarly one I did not quite know yet: a researcher without a face.

In June of 2012, I deleted my @tumblesweed Twitter account and started two new ones. I created a private account for @leslieheme, so I could keep in touch with some of the people who knew me. Then I made a public anonymous account: @s0undbomb3r.

the exphilosopher
@tumblesweed
Lexico

rhetor. compie. otherwise assorted being.
<http://yadayadapourlayada.wordpress.com>

17.9K TWEETS	333 FOLLOWING	456 FOLLOWERS
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Edit profile

Figure 10.5. Who is @tumblesweed (the exphilosopher).

Verizon 19:38

@soundb0mb3r Tweets

don't fret: the beauty of infinite possibilities is that what matters is what we choose to substitute in the place of the [answer].

scare quotes @soundb0mb3r 4d
pieces will be missing. there is always more to know, to find, to rupture that which we make finite.

scare quotes @soundb0mb3r 4d
the problem with collecting data is that there really is no beginning or end to knowledge of something.

scare quotes @soundb0mb3r 4d
rhetoric is useful in second-guessing linguistics, the latter considered a more truthful form of study because of its "empiricism".

Home Connect Discover Me

Figure 10.6. The rhetoric of @soundb0mb3r (scare quotes).

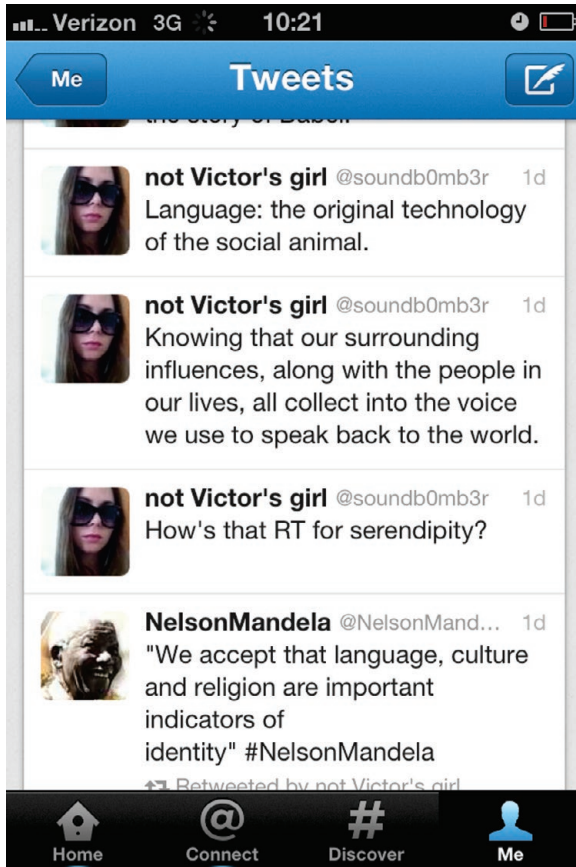


Figure 10.7. The rhetoric of @soundb0mb3r (not Victor's girl).

@soundb0mb3r's Twitter body, shown here in Figures 10.6 and 10.7, allowed me to present a mixed, *chusmeria* representation of my anonymous and academic selves. I look at these tweets through strategic contemplation and see how I blended an anonymous identity with my academic one. These timeline screenshots show @soundb0mb3r speaking in Twitter to project a mismatched, clashing (loudly, defiant even) self. While it feels a bit odd to reflect on an identity of mine in the third person, Muñoz (1999) proposed what a practice of *chusmeria* could mean:

Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world. (p. 196)

I won't go as far as saying that my little Twitter account made a new reality on its own. However, I will contextualize the academic practice I engaged in *with* the culture I participated *within*: Anonymous. Having used the @soundb0mb3r identity to study anonymity, I adopted the same rhetorical practices of its culture, and I find this practice akin to a method of disidentificatory, *chusmeria* performance.

ORIENTATIONS OF ANONYMITY

This is the moment when I remind readers of my earlier discussion that identities orient to their communities and cultures of anonymity that go beyond individuality. As I discussed, no Twitter account exists there without connections to other accounts. Therefore, I have an imperative to orient @soundb0mb3r with a community of anonymity by discussing Anonymous.



Why is it #AnonCulture? Because we already have our own language, art, music, videos, news and many other forms of expressions.

#anonymous

4/28/13, 11:45

Figure 10.8. @nagoul1 refers to Anonymous as a culture and a family (Witchy).

In this stream of tweets in succession (see Figure 10.8), @nagoul1 takes the mainstream definition of Anonymous as a group of hackers and resituates it as a form of expression by their use of the hashtag #AnonCulture. The use of a hashtag, in this instance, creates a conversation where before there was none. Hashtags establish a place—a location—where people who share similar ideas can collect around to speak together. Like FoolishReporter expresses in Figure 10.10, hashtags operate similar to an empty vessel. And, to be *in* Twitter is equally about being a Twitter @ as it is about speaking as an @. When hashtags emerge in Twitter in real time, they provide a chance for people to participate in speech acts together. @nagoul1's speech acts, therefore, execute what Muñoz (1999) called *reterritorializing*: when a subject takes injurious speech such as a name or label used pejoratively, and embraces it as a sense of self (p. 185). @nagoul1 reterritorializes the anonymous

label by pointing out that not every anon is a hacker, despite popular opinion. According to @nagoul1, a well-respected anon within the community, a majority of anons have careers producing texts and art. I see what @nagoul1 says as an enactment of Brecht's dialectical materialism. These tweets change the relationships anyone reading them may have with this account by changing the definition of Anonymous—a definition that has led to many an arrest.



Figure 10.10. Do something and that's you. (@houstonbch 14 May 2013 11:12 am).

@nagoul1 used the hashtag as a forum to reorient anonymity in this space, and even arguably outside it. Their tweets allow for a reconsideration of anonymous Twitter accounts as identities with more to them than just being identified as hackers or trolls. Rather, they can be seen as people with rich cultural lives outside of their Twitter selves. By using the #AnonCulture hashtag, @nagoul makes room for our social relationship with anonymity to change. Now, move with me as I bring in @AnonyOps to further change the identification with this label.

In Figure 10.10, @AnonyOps uses the hashtag #YoureNowAnonymous as a syntactical construction that reorients the possibility for anyone to wear the Anonymous identity. *Doing* something without talking about it, without defining the action by one's name and thus one's ego, characterizes the Anonymous ethos. The Anonymous form of anonymity symbolizes identification with a performed political ethos—an activism resisting fame or publicity.



Anonymous

@YourAnonNews

**We are mothers & daughters. We
are you. You are us. We are Legion.
@SaraMandil: Do you have female
members too in your organization?
#AskYAN**

1/4/13, 20:28

Figure 10.11. Three tweets about the Anonymous Identity (YourAnonNews).



BrazilAnon

@BrazilAnon



**We are Fathers. We are Mothers.
We are Sisters. We are Brothers.
We are Aunts. We are Uncles. It's
time to fight back #Anonymous.**

9/3/11, 23:10

Figure 10.12. Three tweets about the Anonymous Identity (BrazilAnon).



Joshua Corman
@joshcorman



Resolved: If you've not seen "Fight Club" you're missing a huge piece of why #Anonymous is a bigger deal than you suspect

5/4/13, 19:46

Figure 10.13. Three tweets about the Anonymous Identity (Corman).

The tweets in Figures 10.11, 10.12, and 10.13 further highlight Anonymous' ideological ethos. By opening discussion through the #AskYAN hashtag, @YourAnonNews' engages with @SaraMandrill to project a feminist rhetoric of inclusion into the Anonymous identity. Listing "mothers & daughters" alongside the plural pronouns of "you," "us," and "we" includes @SaraMandrill in not just a conversation, but with constructing Anonymous as part of her own identity. Meanwhile, @BrazilAnon articulates their tweet in a patriarchally centered discourse by listing "Fathers" before "Mothers," but then complicates that dominant discourse by choosing to list "Sisters" before "Brothers" and "Aunts" before "Uncles." Both tweets imply that the reader or viewer as identifying with Anonymous through the use of the collective personal pronoun "we," which is part and parcel of the "We Are All Anonymous" ethos.

To explicate this ethos further, we can look at @joshcorman's tweet. Anonymous has appropriated the film *Fight Club* as a cultural artifact because of the film's representation of an underground society initiating chaos and revolution. *Fight Club* purposely disrupts the audience's conception of the performer's identities because it portrays the protagonist and the antagonist as separate people. Surprise and/or shock ensues once the audience learns that they are one and the same person. Yet, The Narrator and Tyler Durden are as separate as they are one; each man acts on his own for personal motive. @joshcorman implied this in his tweet. And it is this paradox of blending individuality with a collective identity that composes the Anonymous ideology. Muñoz (1999) explained how such a paradox can be an identity: "Performance is capable of providing a ground-level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere. Disidentificatory performance willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the 'real'" (p. 196). So long as majoritarian culture (ex-

emplified in instances such as how Facebook handles identity presentation in its platform) asserts that a person can only be one self, anonymous performativity can resist hegemony via a collective identity. Anonymity says that identity need not be singular in order to appease majoritarian culture. To embody anonymity performs resistance against the reading of identity as limited.

EMBODYING ANONYMITY FOR POLITICAL AGENCY

I arrive at this place in my scholarship, and I have to ask: What about our society makes us need anonymity as an identity in the first place? What affordances does anonymity provide us? Why would some of us need to hide who we are? In Figure 10.14, @AnonyNewsNet reasons why some people need anonymity.



Figure 10.14. Inkosi on our social necessity for anonymity (Inkosikazi).

By placing these two statements in quotes with no nominal acknowledgment, they read like a character's lines in a play: open for embodiment. I pay critical attention to what the performance of these lines say. For one, they say what they literally say—that anonymity is democratic and necessary to keeping free speech safe. Incidentally, they also say that one can only be safe to say such a thing if one is anonymous. Because @AnonyNewsNet wears anonymity, they perform the very anonymity to which one needs to speak. The performativity of anonymity here is ideologically meta-representative.

Anonymity provides a person with a possibility to speak against the majoritarian expectations of the self. Wanting this for oneself is not rare. In fact, Michel Foucault (2010) wrote with a longing for anonymity:

At the moment of speaking, I would like to have perceived a nameless voice, long preceding me, leaving me merely to en-

mesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices as if it had paused an instant, in suspense, to beckon to me. (p. 215)

Foucault essentially asked for anonymity to absorb him and define his identity. I want to argue that his desire to have this anonymity *long preceding him* imprints a history onto anonymous desires. Perhaps this was Foucault’s response to Western culture’s overwhelming idolatry of him as a celebrity, or maybe it was a deeper desire to resist the reification of a singular identity in general. Perhaps it was both, meshed irrevocably together.

Being in a place of confusion about Foucault’s desire for anonymity recalls me back to the body—my body. I consider why I gave up my @soundb0mb3r identity in early 2013, and made a new, queered and feminist version of myself: @codemesh.



Figure 10.15. The chusmeria of @codemesh circa Spring 2013 (chusma).

This screenshot from 2013 of my current Twitter account shows the visual collection of all my Twitter identities in one; @codemesh best embodies the continuous revolutions of my selves. She represents a simultaneous disassociation from my legal name by hiding all identity markers, but also hints toward a blending of my professional and anonymous identities. I change my avatar, secondary name (pictured here as *chusma*) and profile descriptions often. I do this because I am, indeed, “in a self i don’t know yet.” Constant visual changes emphasize that my Twitter identity is always in a process of developing based on continual reorientations. I practice an identity ethic that Steve Urbanski (2011) used Foucault to define:

Foucault sees ethics as an entity that is pushed and pulled by the binary oppositions of constraint and freedom: Too much of oneself constrains ethics and the freedom of a multitude of voices propels an ethic of action. On the other hand, an unbridled collection of voices can be just as restrictive. The answer resides in a balance between the two undergirded by critical thinking. To achieve this ethical salvation, one must first know oneself well enough to break free of the bonds of self and dis-

cover an agency that can bring about change. (p. 8)

The queer feminist in me believes in the ethics of rejecting a reification of a single identity while maintaining a distance, at times, from being consumed by the multitude. It is a tricky dance of personal politics, but it is a dance that never limits what I can do, who I can study, or what I can say. The trick, as Urbanski (2011) argued, requires knowing oneself well—a method strategic contemplation encourages.

During this time in 2013, I found myself confronted with a moment of reorientation that required new contemplation. On a whim, I had made @codemesh's avatar a picture of my face—the first time I had done so since I was @LesHeme. I unmasked myself to see what would happen. Quickly after switching avatars, a Twitter friend told me in a private message of their surprise to learn that I was “female” (see Figures 10.16 and 10.17). I responded by being curious about what part of my Twitter identity previously performed masculinity.



Figure 10.16. The @codemesh gender identity problem (@codemesh).

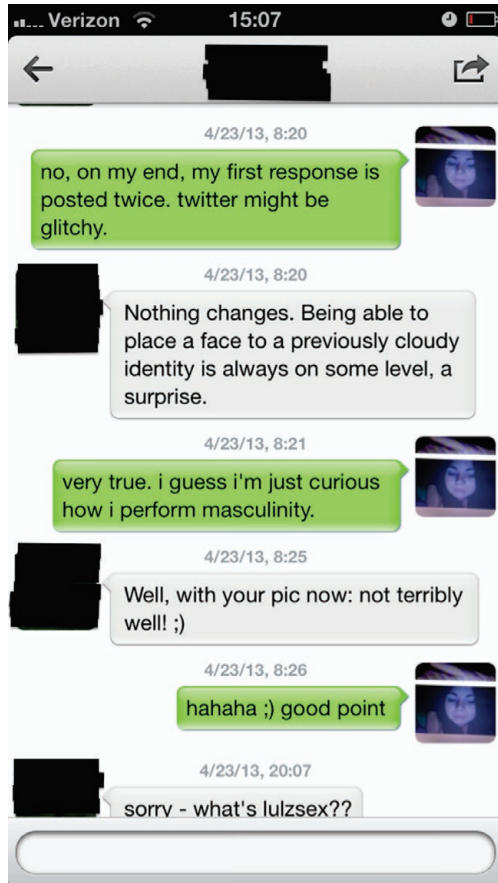


Figure 10.17. The @codemesh gender identity problem (@codemesh).

This conversation taught me that instances where my gender, sexual, or nominal identities become apparent forces an awareness of the instability of anonymity. At that very moment, I knew that further analysis required a re-focus on feminist rhetorics of identity.

Feminist scholars have emphasized publishing subjectivity-based narratives as a discursive form of activism against patriarchy. A mentor of mine, Jacqueline Rhodes, profoundly influenced the subjectivity I chose to inhabit in this paper. Rhodes (2002) analyzed the embodiment of the feminist subjectivity within Internet history. She held that being a feminist body online allows for certain politics:

This emphasis on the situatedness of text, technology, and subjectivity, as well as the rejection of a hierarchical informa-

tion structure, can make the World Wide Web a particularly rich site for feminist action, particularly the ambiguous yet purposeful collaboration—a type of “collaborative interruption,” that is—that was the hallmark of radical feminism. (p. 20)

Rhodes connected an embodied feminist subjectivity to the process of hypertextual production of texts. Rhodes taught me that to embody a digital, feminist identity makes feminist action online possible. Therefore, having a feminist Twitter identity brings me into a history of feminist subjectivity.

With Rhodes’ work, I am inclined to ask: What kinds of orientations does an anonymous feminist Twitter body create? As anyone who has been subject to harmful discourse, online trolling, or harassment knows, having “no face” allows people to say terrible things online. However, I want to challenge us to pause and reflect before we simply write off the wielding of anonymity as solely indicative of harmful behavior. Before I answer that question, I want us to consider how anonymity occurs as a natural attribute of our everyday lives. We must read anonymity rhetorically because the anonymous body is a body that can be read.

Studying anonymity in Twitter focuses my attention to tweets about anonymity. Even people who project seemingly “literal” versions of themselves fail to recognize *why* someone would want to be anonymous in the first place, which is ironic because they are not literally *themselves* in Twitter either (note Figure 10.12). Misnomers about anonymity surface in my timeline every day, which is why I began this work in the first place. I return to Rhodes (2002), who pointed out that “the online interplay of fixity, fluidity, text, and identity has much to do with the particular textual ambiguities of online discourse, particularly as evidenced in the preferred medium of hypertext” (p. 118). Twitter’s nature of bringing people together by making account names and hashtags hypertextual reinforces this fluidity between identities that Rhodes described.

I offer that we can embody a feminist form of anonymity since anonymity keeps the foundational structures of radical feminist practices intact. Combating misogynistic and patriarchal discourse online through anonymity as an online practice empowers women with a sense of communal agency. I attempted my own study of this practice myself by joining feminist activists in the hashtag conversation #KillAllMen in 2014. The harassment from misogynist trolls in my mentions because of tweeting with this hashtag grew to such high numbers that I had to temporarily change my @codemesh name and make my account private. I also deleted the one tweet that received a bulk of the attention, and then posted this one in response (see Figure 10.18).



Figure 10.18. Mistakes were made. (codemesh)

My use of the #killallmen hashtag contributed to a pre-existing conversation started by feminist activists in Twitter. They purposefully employed hyperbole in this hashtag to emphasize the lived reality of violence that women experience every day. By speaking in this hashtag, feminists are able to express their anger and fears about misogyny and patriarchy. I contributed to this conversation as a feminist, a woman who has experienced violence by men, and as an academic who questioned why my first tweet with this hashtag led to nearly debilitating harassment.

I learned about the fragility of feminist embodiment from the trolling and harassment that followed. I had my face as my avatar, which *told* the world that I was a woman using this hashtag. Had I been fully anonymous, I do not know what the responses would have been. However, I have a suspecting belief that had I presented as male, I would not have had to change my @ name and hide. Combatting misogyny online is scary. Being anonymous online can also have its terrifying moments. The fragility in both identity presentations has its share of consequences. Neither provides full safety or security for saying something that might upset someone else. The difference is that when I use an anonymous body to speak, no one in Twitter can tell if I am a boy or a girl (a play on the 30th rule of the Internet, “There are no girls on the Internet”).

WHEN WORDS ARE OUR IDENTITY

Because of this experience, I discovered that none of us are exempt from others questioning *who* we are or *what* we say. If anything, a conversation with a stranger has made me all the more aware of the instability of identity. Therefore, it is vitally important to the health of our shared public spaces that we remember that the harmful discourses of dominant, majoritarian culture follow us by our ways with language.

I emphasize that the Anonymous community is as guilty of using harmful discourses as anyone else. Let me discuss the content in Figure 10.19 as an ex-

ample. (Trigger warning: homophobic slurs and discussion of sexual violence follow.)

Fag is one of the most, but certainly not the only, well-known slurs within many Anonymous communities. In Figure 10.19, @TheLulzDeptxx connects it to the act of unmasking (a person coming out as their legal identity; such an act can happen when a person is doxxed or arrested) and wanting fame. Within the Anonymous ethos, the desire for fame is an antithetical sin. We can see an example of this when Deric Lostutter acquired fame and recognition for his part in doxxing a group of high school football players who gang-raped a sixteen-year-old girl in Steubenville, Ohio. Lostutter's embodiment of the Anonymous ethos suffered a loss of credibility when he used his name to garner public attention.



Figure 10.19. The nearly synonymous use of “fag” with Anons.



Figure 10.20. Who wrote on my Tumblr as anon?

In addition to fag being used as a pejorative for people who “unmask,” the use of it as unnecessary commentary often surfaces throughout the Internet, as I have tried to capture in @HeavenMacArthur’s tweet (see Figure 10.20). I find @HeavenMacArthur’s point that she “know[s] like 4 people” who call her fag very interesting. What *know* means here is ambiguous. The people posting such comments in her Tumblr have obvious knowledge of the rhetorical affordances of anonymity when speaking.

Because anonymity masks names, it focuses attention on the speech as the primary means of identification. Both tweets in Figures 10.19 and 10.20 demonstrate the investments of these anonymous speakers. @TheLulzDeptxx displays the amount of anger they reserve for people who use Anonymous as an instigator for fame. The screen capture of her Tumblr comment in @HeavenMacArthur's tweet expresses the person's desire for affect, not conversation. That comment serves no purpose other than to incite @HeavenMacArthur's emotion—a ploy of pathos through a slur, pure and simple.

In this instance, we grasp the negative aspects of these affordances. Like Bill Reader (2012) noted, many people often equate anonymity with incivility. Nevertheless, Reader also acknowledged that anonymity allows people to speak truth to powerful institutions (p. 503). I take this conflicting data to mean that anonymity reflects the myriad of ways people use discourse whether they present as anonymous or not. After all, people say horrible things both online and offline every day under their own names. People also attempt to speak truth to power and powerful institutions when they feel oppressed. Therefore, anonymity doesn't mask speech; it masks names.

The masking of names permits people to say many things they would normally not be able to articulate. Anonymity provides a realm of safety from consequences. It also provides people with the ability to comment on the way anonymity allows for people to say horrible things. @Kilgoar's tweet, as seen in Figure 10.21, is one instance of this.



**You Anons might think it's really
cute to "fag" this and "faggotry"
that but to everyone else you just
look like a homophobic bigot.**

5/28/13, 16:17

Figure 10.21. @Kilgoar's reminder goes +9000 (@Kilgoar).

@Kilgoar argued against the way people identifying as Anonymous use fag as part of their discourse. @Kilgoar used anonymity to make these statements, yet again reiterating the meta-representative function of anonymity as an ethos. @Kilgoar's anonymous identity permitted them to speak as part of the anonymous community in Twitter. Such a speech act encourages the discourse about

anonymity to change by creating new articulations. @Kilgoar intimates that the use of fag does not necessarily operate as a slur in this community. Rather, it is a use of the term that “everyone else” misunderstands.

Without putting unwanted attention on individuals I have conversed with about this topic, I cannot show tweets that further represent the use of fag as a term of endearment. I can, however, talk about it abstractly. @Kilgoar’s intimation of fag having a specific meaning within Anonymous culture is sound. Many anonymous Twitter accounts specifically reserve words like fag and cunt for their comrades and friends. From the outside, though, this use is easily misunderstood. Even I find it off-putting and unnerving at times. Those are the moments when I come to terms with the conflicting identities I embody in this space. Sometimes they just don’t mesh. This is when I embrace the ways my discomfort teaches me something new.

WHEN IDENTITY GETS REAL

Not every Twitter user has the same privilege to participate in online conversations freely without consequences. Most of us have to account for our social positions, genders, politics, even our sexualities when we speak online. Therefore, anonymity is one way to protect oneself from the restrictions of speaking publicly as a regular, everyday person. I call anonymity a form of identity encryption because it allows anyone who wears it to keep parts of themselves safely hidden while still enabling them to speak online.



Figure 10.22. Hamster is always in swallow mode.

I showcase @SwallowRedux’s tweet (in Figure 10.22) about their accidental embodiment of a hamster in Twitter to point to Twitter’s capacity to let users play with the personal connections they have to its platform. @SwallowRedux takes on a hamster as an identification. Twitter’s ability for play and identification gives users who identify as “real” versions of themselves different options.

This policeman in Granada (see Figure 10.23) has the opportunity to wear a patch of his Twitter @ name on his arm, an opportunity not many people can adopt in their everyday lives. @Umair_Aziz refers to the image of @PoliciaJun

as a “pretty amazing approach to Twitter,” to which I heartily agree. There’s a blurring of online and offline boundaries here that I especially appreciate, but I additionally note something more. @PoliciaJun is not this policeman’s sole identity. Surely, he has more to his life than his career. I have a small inclination to ask: Is he, by chance, anyone else online? A problem might arise if I were to use Twitter to ask him, for admitting a personal online identity through his professional one would conflate the two. And, it could also bring harassment and trolling his way. Through embodying his professional *policia* identity, @PoliciaJun adopts an air of law enforcement and legal protection—something very few of us can adopt ourselves.



Figure 10.23. @PoliciaJun plays himself IRL (@Umair_Aziz).

Twitter affords comedians, celebrities, and politicians another kind of difference for speaking there. In Figure 10.24, we see a conversation scaffold among all three kinds of identities I listed above. Writer @MacMoreno participates in a conversation that Patrick Stewart, Rob Delaney, and David Cameron have adapted in sequential order. Both Delaney and Stewart play with the seriousness of Cameron’s original tweet showing him talking to @BarackObama about the situation in Ukraine. Stewart’s tweet usurps Delaney’s in hilarity by his use of

a Wet Ones container as a phone. @MacMoreno further adds to this comedic conversation by using his dog. The tweet scaffold stops at Moreno because he is not a celebrity, but simply a writer. His name does not precede his identity. In this way, the scaffolding works backwards. Cameron can tag the United States President in earnest, even expecting a response. Delaney, however, cannot expect the same from either Obama or Cameron. Sir Patrick Stewart could, theoretically expect a response from any of these men, and knows it. Instead, he uses his name for play with the picture he has added. Moreno's tweet marks the end of the conversation because the men preceding him may not even know who he is and did not acknowledge his addition to their tweets. This tweet proves that in Twitter, even if others are available to us, identities are not equal.



Figure 10.24. Calling in to a conference call.

WHERE CAN IDENTITY IN TWITTER GO?

My embodied research on anonymity in Twitter taught me that new identities have the potential for embodiment in a moment of random happenstance. The space of Twitter enables our @ identities to become bodies they could not be otherwise and speak as voices we have yet to hear. Our timelines bring strangers to us just as hashtags open spaces for shared values that do not yet exist. Every day in Twitter is a new day for expressing collective pain, anger, happiness, resistance, and even humor.

Anonymity gives us the opportunity to participate in Twitter without

worry that what we say might affect who we are. I affirm this by admitting that this chapter wouldn't exist if I was still employed at a university in Kansas. Late in 2013, the Kansas Board of Regents adopted a social media policy severely limiting the freedom of its tenured and non-tenured employees to speak online. I was temporary faculty then, which made my scholarship on anonymity a legitimate cause for concern. I felt fear, repression, and hesitation when this policy came into effect, knowing I needed to leave after my contract was over if I was to continue developing my methodology for anonymous embodiment.

The social media policy exists because the Kansas Board of Regents did not appreciate professor David Guth tweeting with anger and emotion in response to a violent shooting incident. Like him, Steven Salaita suffered a termination of his tenure-line contract with the University of Illinois for tweeting with anger and emotion about violence in Palestine. Both Salaita and Guth used Twitter as a space to discuss their feelings about tragedies that held personal significance to their lives. They were punished professionally for their speech.

Such instances tell me that academics need anonymity more than ever.

Considering these accounts of silencing and repression that have happened, anonymity may be one of the only forms of resistance many of us have for speaking online. My life has been shaped and continues to be shaped by these risks. Risk orients my body.

And I recognize that I am not alone in experiencing this risk. The solidarity I feel with my fellow academics, journalists, Internet researchers, and anyone who experiences the consequences of speaking online matters. Solidarity keeps us going. We submit ourselves to these risks because we believe in the potential of our work to create change. I believe we have a right to it. To return to the Foucault (2010) quote at the beginning of this chapter, "leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us *their* morality when we write" (p. 17, emphasis mine).

I conclude this chapter with an urging that we, as academics, continue to theorize the relationship between our bodies and our digital, social platforms. How we speak affects who we are, and vice versa. To enact agency online lies in the ability to define our own identity and choose our orientations to one another. For us to have power to be heard, we have to value our various embodiments of this agency. I can only hope that the work I have started here with my own experience of embodying anonymity is a beginning—that scholars continue to make space for questioning who we are online. I also have hope that the risks we incur for speaking decrease. These tumultuous times beg for our active participation. This chapter is just one perspective in the conversation.

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