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Anonymity's Constructions and Deconstructions of the Self

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Abstract

Thomas DeGloma's book *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities* (2023) astutely illuminates anonymity, but also provides an opportunity to explore wider theoretical and societal issues, including democracy and conceptions of the self. This essay takes the book's theoretical ambitions seriously and, in doing so, identifies several ways the overall project could be pushed forward. The essay's reflections thus revolve around issues such as the morality of anonymity, the book's methodology, the relationship between community and individualism, and the dynamic relationship between democracy and individual appearance.

Keywords: A unified self; Democracy and individual appearance; Failed anonymity; Philanthropy; Hannah Arendt.

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Once you have read *Anonymous: The Performance of Hidden Identities,* by Thomas DeGloma (2023), you will see anonymity everywhere. These days (Summer 2025), it may appear in the form of anonymous ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents wearing masks and bearing no IDs when arresting and detaining undocumented immigrants, visa and green-card holders, and U.S. citizens alike. In turn, these arrestees oscillate between attempting to prove their individual identities and legitimate statuses (sometimes making an effort to carry documentation of such with them) or clinging to their own previously protective conditions of anonymity. Or we may encounter anonymity in the form of cautious anonymous philanthropic donors attempting to rescue academic or cultural institutions from the Trump administration's withdrawal of federal funding. But the fact is that anonymity has been a ubiquitous social phenomenon throughout history, and the book makes this case brilliantly. Beyond simply being replete with interesting and arcane knowledge (for example, I learned that the Catholic Church has something called the Institute for Sacred Architecture), the book most importantly provokes radically new thinking about core social concepts like anonymity, social relations, attribution and responsibility, social connection and coordination, and, most of all, the self. From an altogether different angle than that performed by Michel Foucault, Tom DeGloma has managed to deconstruct the concept of a unified, coherent, continuous, and recognizable self with his analysis of the selflessness of anonymity.

Anonymous has broad theoretical ambitions (and the book was the American Sociological Association Theory Section book award winner in 2024). The book achieves the exposition and deconstruction of the unified self-concept through several theoretical and methodological moves. One move is that the book seeks to distinguish anonymity from other cognate forms and processes, such as those that mimic or approach anonymity, for example, identity transformations (e.g., DeGloma provides a contrast with rituals in which masked Shinto actors temporarily transform into sacred beings only to retrieve them at the ritual's end).[1] But these distinctions and the modes of identity transformation they accomplish assume the existence of a *self that can* be hidden and/or transformed. Ultimately, I think that that assumption may be the not-so-hidden true topic of the book, the possibilities of and for a coherent and sustained self in a world in which identity and agency are challenged, fragmented, and threatened in so many ways.

Determinedly sociological in its constitution and aims, *Anonymous* presents the phenomenon of anonymity as fundamentally cultural and interactionist. Anonymity and its cousin, pseudonymity — note the prominence of the concept of one's name as an issue in both performance options — are "best understood as performances in which the actors obscure personal identities as they make meaning for various audiences" (DeGloma, 2023, p. 5). Further, anonymity does not exist in latent form. It requires action to exist: "[I]n order to be relevant or meaningful at all, anonymity must be moved into action — brought to life in social situations or circumstances that involve dynamic relations or interactions with other people [...]. Anonymity is a matter of performative accomplishment" (DeGloma, 2023, p. 5). While never fully determinative of how others will react, anonymous identities require

1. "Likewise in some Kagura (Shinto dance rituals) that took place at night, participants wore masks to animate demons that would 'return to *their world* at daybreak' In such ceremonial contexts, it does not make sense to speak of anonymity of the actors behind the masks. They were not hiding their personal identities. Nor were they seen as agents who manipulated or acted 'behind' the beings they became in sacred settings. Rather their personal identities temporarily disappeared to be replaced during the sacred episode. These transformations of living persons into sacred characters were possible and powerful because they expressed the metaphysical worldview and shared sentiments of the community behind them" (DeGloma, 2023, pp. 78–79).

attentive others to have *some kind* of reaction. Thus, analysis of anonymity in social life must find its empirical source in those various performances (as well as, potentially, in those reactions). This book aims its analysis squarely at the performance of anonymity. Further, and importantly, the book is not analytically interested in the morality of anonymity or the moral character of anonymous acts. This is a bold stance, especially when the cases under analysis include groups like the Ku Klux Klan. But even accepting the *goal* of bracketing the morality question, the reader, and I would argue the book, inevitably go there. We constantly bump up against the ethics and morality of choosing to be anonymous. The very fact that the book's analytical framework identifies and distinguishes between different forms of anonymity, e.g., "protective anonymity" and "subversive anonymity", reveals as much. There is also, for example, an appeal to a kind of moral judgment in the claim that: "Considering the dynamics of information control, anonymous actors adopt the formal characteristics of *controlled exhibitionism* and *concealed voyeurism*" (DeGloma, 2023, p. 16). It's impossible to ignore the fact that, as a performance, anonymous action demands judgment on, precisely, the morality of its anonymity. Neither exhibitionism nor voyeurism has a positive valence, regardless of the end products of actions characterized by such intentions.

The book's own methodology, its own "performance", is one of "theoretical sampling", using different kinds of data (texts, images, films), moving from case to case, and allowing cases to confront each other (sometimes provocatively and counter-intuitively). Theoretically, the book draws from symbolic interactionism, cultural sociology, and performance theory in its sensitivity to both structures of meaning and processes of meaning-making. Along with these methodological and theoretical stances comes the empirical challenge of researching anonymity itself — if anonymity is successful at masking an action's source or someone's identity, there is, in theory, no way to know exactly where to look to find the source of action or to know who to interview. It's a kind of methodological Catch-22. The focus on anonymity's *performance* responds to this empirical difficulty. But in doing so, it must bracket the internal motivations, rationales, or goals of those adopting anonymity. Of course, formerly anonymous actors are available for examination, but they are, in a certain sense, tainted by their eventual exposure.

A recent example of failed anonymity (and successful philanthropy) demonstrates this vulnerability. Regarding a billion-dollar gift ensuring free tuition to future medical students, made to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, *The New York Times* reported that the donor, Dr. Ruth Gottesman, a Professor of Pediatrics Emerita at Einstein, "was reluctant to attach her name to her donation". "Nobody needs to know", Dr. [Philip] Ozuah recalled her saying at first. But Dr. Ozuah insisted that others might find her life inspiring. "Here's somebody who is totally dedicated to the welfare of others and wants no accolades, no recognition", Dr. Ozuah said".[2] So, upon the advice of her colleague and friend, the anonymous donor revealed herself, receiving precisely the accolades that her original choice of remaining anonymous was crafted to avoid. This is a good example of how tethered anonymity relates to issues of morality and attribution — one's decision to remain anonymous signals either a preoccupation with being blamed for an action that will be judged negatively or demurral on the inevitable praise for an action that will be judged positively. In this way, the actor attempts to avoid moral judgments. And we might conclude that this avoidance strategy is mirrored in the book's own attempt to do so, in its focus on the performance of anonymity.

Even so, every anonymous performance and "encounter" has a story and an angle. The

2. Goldstein, J. (2024). $1 Billion Donation Will Provide Free Tuition at a Bronx Medical School. *New York Times*, February 26. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/nyregion/albert-einstein-college-medicine-bronx-donation.html?searchResultPosition=1.

book surveys many cases of anonymity. Those that are identified and sampled include cases along a continuum of general approbation and general condemnation: Alcoholics Anonymous, Anonymous (of Occupy Wall Street fame), the Ku Klux Klan, Zapatistas, CIA Counterintelligence (COINTELPRO), and Q-Anon, among them. They are usefully all over the place in their politics, structures, and performance strategies, thus allowing the study to discern the underlying formal structures of the anonymity phenomenon in a Simmelian mode.

Beyond the phenomenon of anonymity itself, the book raised several related issues for me. These include the relationship between community and individualism, the dynamic relationship between democracy and individual appearance, and the ways that our defaulting to categorical identifications and justifications produces a certain ontological background of anonymity. For example, regarding the community/individualism relationship, DeGloma claims that there are anonymous communities, which can and do maintain a "culture of reciprocal anonymity or pseudonymity". Indeed, the protective and subversive dimensions of anonymity may be "inseparably intertwined".

While considering the book's presentation of these issues, I found myself thinking about Hannah Arendt's understanding of politics and her fundamental requirement of an appearance together in public. Arendt (1960) writes: "Without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance [...] where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly" (p. 30). For Arendt, the realm of politics is synonymous with this common space of mutual explicit appearances of free individuals. Speaking about the members of the French Resistance during WWII, Arendt writes: "Freedom needed, in addition to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public space to meet them — a politically organized world, in other words, into which each of the free men could insert himself by word or deed" (2006[1961], p. 144).[3] Of course, here's the rub — the members of the Resistance had to initially enact this political space in what DeGloma would recognize as anonymity or pseudonymity because of the dangers of revealing one's identity during the war. So, for a time, at least, one's ability to explicitly "appear to others as others appear to me" was denied. Furthermore, the contingent separation of political action from morality runs through Arendt's analysis as well. In fact, DeGloma himself quotes from Arendt's *The Human Condition* on the impossibility of goodness and individual attribution coexisting, at least in the Christian tradition: "[D]escribing this concealment as necessary to the purity of righteousness in the Christian tradition, Hannah Arendt argued that 'the moment a good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of being done for nothing but goodness' sake' and 'goodness must go into absolute hiding and flee all appearance if it is not to be destroyed' " (DeGloma, 2023, p. 44).

Paradoxes like these abound throughout DeGloma's book, but the stress on mutual appearance in a common space that Arendt posits seems something of a challenge to anonymity's abilities — tracing the limits, perhaps, of the ability to constitute a *demos* in a world where anonymity plays a dominant role. Such issues insist themselves on readers struggling to assess secret ballots, secret votes, anonymous or pseudonymous broadsides or posts in social media,

3. She also connects these possibilities to the issues of social masks and authenticity when reflecting on members of the French Resistance: "In this nakedness, stripped of all masks — of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself [...] they had been visited for the first time in their lives by an apparition of freedom [...] because they had become 'challengers,' had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear" (Arendt, 2006[1961], p. 26).

all of which appear and are justified in "democracies".

Anonymity's roles and manifestations are various and not always recognized as such. Chapter 5 of the book develops a discussion of typification and categorization as a mode of anonymity. Is the phenomenon of typification really about anonymity? Yes, according to DeGloma, following Berger and Luckmann's concept of the "anonymity of the type". Regarding this, DeGloma writes: "Socially established typification schemes provide ontological frameworks that we often use to eclipse personal identities in meaningful ways that make actors anonymous units rather than particular people in certain situations" (DeGloma, p. 137). True enough, but the further question inevitably arises: Is anyone particular? Is singularity itself recognizable, absent pre-established categories of discernment and labelling? And in that sense, are we all somewhat anonymous to each other in our performances of self? Is anonymity in this reading tantamount to the empirical necessity of establishing the generic?

Over the course of reading this chapter and realizing the cumulative effect of the book on my thinking, I began to wonder if anonymity can be better conceptualized as being on a continuum rather than as a binary. Do we ever really and completely know anybody, including ourselves? How do we know people? Who do we know? How much do we know about people? Isn't it all established through categories and typifications? What's in a name? What is "personal identity"? Is there really such a thing as, DeGloma writes on page 3 of the book, "that which we recognize as an individual's unique being in relation to others"? His answer seems to be a qualified yes: "Personalization stands as the antithesis of anonymity. It undoes the someoneness, anyoness, everyoness, and no oneness of anonymous and pseudonymous acts [...]" (DeGloma, 2023, p. 178). This position thus construes an essential and continuous dialectic between anonymity and personalization as fundamental to the human condition — but one that is never settled.

Contingencies of time and situations definitely play a role here. DeGloma (2023) writes: "Thus, over the course of our lives and each particular day, our different relationships are defined by varying degrees of intimacy and anonymity" (p. 139).[4] And this returns me to Arendt — maybe another way of confirming her criterion for democracy in the polis and for understanding the self's condition is by way of saying that *we are least anonymous when we act with others*. The situation is, as the interactionists insist, key. And collectivities form and find themselves through acts of mutual recognition.

The book highlights how ideas about particular selves and their availability can assert themselves in compelling and sometimes traumatic ways in situations where anonymity is one-sided. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the anonymity of social systems. Impersonal systems are hard nuts to crack analytically with their "social opacity". Such a phrase certainly brings to mind the organizational structure and peculiar opaque form of authority known as bureaucracy, along with the "specifically modern calculating attitude" invoked by Max Weber. Currently, we conceive of and suffer under the anonymous world of Citizens United based on hidden campaign donors, government and big tech surveillance of citizens, of drones "anonymously" striking targets, and of anonymously administered lethal injections. It is not necessary to be swept up into conspiracy theories of pizza shop sex trafficking to be alarmed by the degrees of displacement from individual responsibility to generalized anonymous surveillance that we now experience. Anonymity operates in both the front end and the back end of actions, including lethal actions. As DeGloma (2023) writes: "[T]he US CIA refers to its drone attacks as 'personality strikes'

4. This connects with DeGloma's (2023) idea of highlighting the temporality of anonymity: "temporarily split with one's personal and biographical past while avoiding future personal association with one's actions while anonymous" (p. 10).

when a known individual is targeted for assassination, and 'signature strikes' when particular individuals, whose personal identities are often unknown, are targeted after surveillance reveals 'patterns of life associated with terrorism' " (p. 119). Patterns of life associated with terrorism produce a pre-emptively culpable form of anonymity available for erasure. And the irony of calling these strikes "signature strikes" is not lost on anyone still believing that one's signature is part of one's unique self.

Some final thoughts. Among the several striking and shocking images presented in the book, I'm left most dismayed by the appearance early in the book of the anonymous, threatening letter (actually written and sent by the FBI) to Martin Luther King Jr., shocking and searing in its tawdry meanness and its specificity of accusation and character assassination. I'm also left perplexed by the letter's opportunistic and exploitative use of the first and second person pronouns: "I repeat, you are done", "I repeat, you are a colossal fraud", "You are a great liability to all of us Negroes" (DeGloma, 2023, p. 20). Who does the letter writer think he is? What license does that anonymous identity provide? How does the bureaucracy of the state wrap itself in such lurid falsehoods? These are questions about power, authority, and agency that surround us even now as we confront the ways in which anonymity works in social and political life. Thanks to Tom DeGloma for raising these issues into our field of vision and leaving us with so many questions and such a keen sense of uneasiness.

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