

Randi Heinrichs

De-Anonymizing Anonymous

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RANDI HEINRICHS

DE-ANONYMIZING ANONYMOUS

Review of: Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy. The Many Faces of Anonymous*, London/New York, Verso, 2014.

In her book *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy. The many faces of Anonymous*, Gabriella Coleman tells the story of how an “entity calling itself Anonymous” [1], starting as an “ungovernable trolling pandemonium” [3], has become what she pictures as “one of the most politically active, morally fascinating, and subversively salient activist groups operating today” [51]. As the first anthropologist to touch this complex phenomenon, she successfully characterizes its socio-technological interdependency, multiplicity and flexibility. Her great accomplishment is having conveyed a structure of something that seems to be changing constantly. Coleman describes the structure of Anonymous as a ‘vivid maze’. The scaffold of the labyrinth is built up chapter by chapter. The paths are entangled with current technological, social, political, local and global conditions. Each journey through the maze is different. Coleman walks along several interconnected and diverging paths without losing orientation – even if it feels like “an infinite machine operating a tight recursive loop wherein mazes generated maze-generating mazes”. [9] Against a totalitarian understanding of research and knowledge, Coleman follows the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche: She doesn’t claim to define what Anonymous ‘really’ is or was, instead she writes her own ‘travel report’ about her experiences of over six years of intensive ethnographical fieldwork.

“I have tried to relay the lessons of Anonymous by narrating its exploits, failures, and successes. These compiled stories are idiosyncratic and told from the vantage point of my personal travels and travails. There are so many untold and secret tales that, were they publicized, would likely shift our

comprehension of Anonymous. While all social life and political movements are complex, even convoluted, displaying endless facets and dimensions, Anonymous' embrace of multiplicity, secrecy, and deception makes it especially difficult to study and comprehend." [393]

That Coleman immerses herself into the raveled hydra of Anonymous, instead of viewing from above over it, is the book's undeniable strength and greatest vulnerability. Hence, the book has been called "an artful advertisement for Anonymous" and Coleman has been accused of being an honorary member of what became famous as the *Internet Hate Machine*.¹ Anons' tactics cover a broad spectrum; they are subversive and undermining, rancorous, unpredictable, and frequently disdainful of etiquette or the law. It is important to keep a critical distance from the often racist, sexist and homophobic utterances emanating from the "ultracoordinated Motherfuckery [6]" of Anonymous. The reproach of becoming too embedded seems inviting, as Coleman makes no secret of her personal connection with the collective [9]. However, besides her enchantment, she also "take[s] a close look at the grisly underworld of trolling from which Anonymous hatched [17]". Considering that there is a methodical approach within her personal involvement, the accusation against the unconventional style of her work is somewhat shortsighted. In her words: "The trick is to integrate and go beyond simply relying on participants' explanations of events." [9] Coleman makes her own standing as an anthropologist a part of the reflexivity she wants to reflect. It is decisive to emphasize the diversity and pervasiveness of her ethnographical corpus, to fully understand her achievement of what also works as an enjoyable storybook for a mainstream audience.

In her article *Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media*, Coleman identifies three categories of ethnographic analysis of digital culture: the Cultural Politics of Digital Media, the Vernacular Cultures of Digital Media and the Prosaics of Digital Media.² Her ethnographic study of Anonymous combines all three categories. She explores the complex relationships between new modes of digital inventiveness, which she calls the "Weapons of the Geeks" [81], and the global activist engagement of the movement, their principles and infrastructures, and how they are fed into discourses on digital technologies in everyday life.

1 Adrian Chen, "The Truth About Anonymous's Activism. A Look behind the Mask Reveals a Naïve Techno-Utopianism", *The Nation*, December 1-8 Issue, 2014. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/issue/december-1-8-2014/> [accessed August 29, 2016].

2 Gabriella Coleman, "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, 2010: pp. 487-505. Available at: <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.104945> [access provided by 89.144.236.4 on June 3, 2016], p. 487.

Cultural Politics of Digital Media examines how cultural identities and representations are (re-)produced and subverted through individual and collective engagement with technologies. Coleman's case is particularly difficult to study, as no individual or single group can claim legal ownership of the name, icons and imagery of Anonymous. Its dissolution of individuality for the sake of collective identity follows 1990s cyber-utopian ideals of decentralization, disembodiment, equality and free flow of information. Everybody is free to don the mask, take the name and experiment with it. As a result of its flexibility, Anonymous has spread across the world and has become "the quintessential anti-brand brand, assuming various configurations and meanings, even as it has also become the popular face of unrest around the globe". [16] The reluctance of a clear and demanding positioning can be interpreted as *the* characteristic position of Anonymous. "Beyond a foundational commitment to the maintenance of anonymity and a broad dedication to the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program" [3], claims Coleman. Peering in from outside, it would hardly be possible to understand the eclectic production of a specific common in the continuously shifting phenomenon. Becoming involved with Anonymous, Coleman can capture principles that define the collective: Anonymous is built on a humorous dissidence, follows an anti-celebrity ethic, intervenes politically in diverse ways and operates in diverse technical bodies [17].

The book maps the overall structure of the hydra collective and elaborates on how subjects and different groups of Anons, as well as their practices and modes of communication, are entirely dependent on digital media. Tracing the *Vernacular Digital Culture* created by Anonymous, Coleman puts her focus on the second category – namely the exploration of specific groups and phenomena, whose logic is organized significantly around digital technologies. For her analysis, she makes sense of data from countless chat protocols, technical virtuosity, DDoS (distributed denial-of-service attack), trolling, viral videos and Internet memes infused with factors like ephemerality, encryption and modalities of hyper-mobility. Therefore, her work is methodologically significant, as it demonstrates how digital media transforms the conditions and possibilities of ethnographical fieldwork.³

To elaborate on the digital media vernaculars, the book focuses on *Lulz* (Schadenfreude), a spirit of humorous deviance, which constitutes the common in Anonymous. Coleman comprehends Lulz as an epistemological object, which erects cultural boundaries, as it needs specific technical and social knowledge. She does not concentrate on

3 Coleman, p. 494.

determining the borders and their inherent inequalities like gender, class and race in terms of content or structure but rather on the revelation through transgression. The core of ‘lulzing’ is to fool around with established social and technical codes. It signifies the laughter at someone else’s expense, often operating on the edge of legality and working by releasing any form of information thought to be personal, secure, or sacred. Victims have their Social Security or Credit Card numbers doxed, receive open orders of numerous pizzas, private communications are posted, and hard drive contents leaked [32]. It can be socio-critical, amusing, stupid, stigmatizing or disgraceful. In any case, the transgression of Lulz works with provocation and outrage. Coleman refers to Friedrich Nietzsche’s investments in questioning the sacred ethos of truth and morality, embracing cunning and hyperbole, and elevating pleasure over reason to build a theoretical framework around the engagement of Anonymous ‘lulzy’ actions 150 years later.⁴ She states that:

“Lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, and our aesthetic sensibilities. Any presumption of our world’s inviolability becomes a weapon; trolls invalidate the world by gesturing toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it – to pull the carpet from under us whenever they feel the urge.” [33]

The book concludes with an outlook on the *Prosaics of Digital Media* and how the use and terms of digital media transformed our everyday life. ‘Lulzing’ demonstrates the fragility of concepts of security in societies of expanded visibility in which data sharing, self-presentation on social media platforms and GPS-tracking have become commonplace. It is a dissident act at a time where the conditions of global mass surveillance are exploited and notoriously well-known, but woefully little is opposed. In Coleman’s words, Anonymous’ behavior is like a “raucous party at the funeral of online freedom and privacy” [376]. The possibilities of new socio-technical assemblage based on digital infrastructures can simultaneously enable new forms of hacktivist political mobilization as well as cyber crime, government surveillance and human rights violations. What might seem contradictory at first – the embracing of severity and playful mischief, ethical violation and moralizing, as well as total transparency and anonymity – are divergent but connected reactions of the complexities and paradoxes of digitalisation. By de-anonymizing the many faces of Anonymous, Coleman develops a multi-linear history of digital culture without unifying the inherent divergence. The book

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, 1891. Available at: <http://philosophy.eserver.org/nietzsche-zarathustra.txt> [accessed August 29, 2016].

provides critical access to current socio-technical formations and offers potential starting points for subsequent analysis of the shift of contemporary regimes of doing and un-doing anonymity in digital cultures.