Book Review

Review of Anon Collective. 2021. *Book of Anonymity*. Earth: punctum books.

486 pp. US\$27.00. Paperback.¹ ISBN: 9781953035301.

Robert Thornton-Lee

Leeds Trinity University, UK
r.thornton-lee@leedstrinity.ac.uk

There has been a resurgent focus on anonymity in recent years within fields such as surveillance studies, critical data studies, digital sociology, and other areas that examine the interrelation between technology and society. Historically, anonymity has frequently been absent or marginalised in these areas, as attention is more often centred on closely aligned phenomena such as secrecy, concealment, deception, invisibility, and resistance. Furthermore, questions surrounding privacy have continually dominated these arenas, leaving anonymity to wait on the sidelines. Whilst the above concepts are present in various configurations across the pages of the *Book of Anonymity*, the volume triumphantly champions anonymity through every page of every contribution, finally providing anonymity with its moment in the sun.

To date, the *Book of Anonymity* represents the largest collection of contemporary interdisciplinary works that focus on the subject. The result is a rich and varied examination and exploration of anonymity that invites the reader to step away from their disciplinary knowledges and to grapple with the complexity of the phenomenon across cultures and contexts. The book is of relevance and interest to those already well-versed in the study of anonymity, as well as to those with a passing interest in the topic who may find themselves more familiar with tangential works that focus on surveillance, privacy, identity, security, and policing. In either case, there is much to be gleaned from the variety of material within the pages of the volume, spanning academic, artistic, and autoethnographical contributions.

The volume opens boldly, arguing that examinations of anonymity can easily fall into a trap of analytical naivety through either failing to acknowledge the ubiquity of technology and its relationship to anonymity or through only being able to conceptualise anonymity in its technological manifestation. It is argued that such theorising produces incomplete configurations of anonymity and pushes the study of anonymity into an intellectual dead-end whereby the productive power of anonymity is erased (17). It is at this juncture that this volume seeks to intervene.

Consisting of twenty-eight contributions, the volume establishes its aims as working to acknowledge the relationship anonymity holds with technology without over privileging it. Simultaneously, in providing an expansive account of anonymity that encompasses practices, techniques, and social relations, the book moves beyond a simplistic relationship of anonymity with individual identity. As outlined in the opening

¹ A free e-book version of this text is also available.

section of the book, “[a]nonymity has to be understood as a mode of knowing and being, indeed as a social form with a very distinct character” (18).

In addition to these theoretical ambitions, the Anon Collective inform us of their political motivations in producing such a volume. Namely, that there is an urgent need to understand how anonymity can facilitate an expansion of inclusive and participatory politics, and how anonymity operates through relations and (often unequal) distributions of power (19). In examining anonymity in this way, the hope of the volume is to lay bare the mutually constitutive relationship between anonymity and sociality and to illuminate anonymity’s inherent productive power (19).

In pursuing these ends, the collection deploys a metaphor to ground and locate itself, advocating for a “kaleidoscopic understanding of anonymity” (23) that can accommodate the diversity of voices and disciplines found throughout its pages. Each twist of this kaleidoscope presents the reader with a new assemblage of artefacts, politics, and knowledges, and in turn, permits the blending of academic, literary, and artistic contributions. The volume is unashamedly heterogenous in its construction and presentation, and rightly so, although such heterogeneity can at times leave the reader feeling disoriented as the contributions progress. Though perhaps that is the intention.

To achieve its theoretical and political ambitions, every contribution identifies and advances the examination of anonymity across and between the interrelation of seven distinct kaleidoscopic twists to greater and lesser success. These twists are identified as: “a catalogue of anonymity techniques” that examine the production of anonymity through technology and technique; “outcomes of anonymity” as a multi-faceted phenomenon concerned with knowledge and of being; “potentialities of anonymity” that account for both the foreseen and unforeseen consequences of anonymity and the prospective futures within the phenomenon; “regimes of anonymity” that explore assemblages of anonymity as a historically contingent and culturally, socially, and politically specific phenomenon; “anonymity as a grey area” in which anonymity is deliberately produced or naturally emerges to destabilise the identity of an individual, but that such an occurrence is situational, unstable, and fragile; “anonymity as active absence” in which absences are thrown into sharp relief and questions are asked of what emerges through such absences; and, finally, “anonymity’s figurations” that examine the figures and relationships involved in the production of anonymity and how these “shape practices, subject positions, and institutions” (27). These kaleidoscopic twists are thematically structured in the book within five distinct sections: “Introductions,” “Reconfigurations,” “Assaults,” “Weapons,” and “Delights.”

It is at this point, towards the end of the introduction, that the enormity of the task ahead is unveiled to the reader. Anonymity is nebulous, multifaceted, and ambivalent. Its productive, destructive, and apathetic effects are readily identified within the contributions that comprise the collection: from examinations of voluntary blood donations in India to the challenges presented to the anonymisation of data through the insatiability of data collectors to discussions of genetics, the urban environment, endocrine disruptors, protesting, governmentality, social media, memory, mourning, and ritual. The content is vast, anonymity is everywhere.

To the credit of the book, each contribution does make progress towards its established theoretical and political aims. Each section, and each chapter, provides its own piece of a puzzle that extends far beyond the volume itself. However, after reading the volume, it is no surprise that such lengths are taken in the opening sections to document the organisation and production of the material. For the most part, the thematic organisation and structure of the book is successful, but at times it feels ostensible as there is an unfortunate sense of disconnection between contributions. The sharp jumps between discursive and disciplinary registers that the book invites readers to make can be jarring, producing a disconcerting situation whereby the reader is left with very little conceptual familiarity to comfort them. In lieu of authorial identification, the reader is left to piece together the location of each contribution, jumping between a range of disciplines including anthropology, politics, philosophy, and sociology, as well as to registers located outside of the walls of academia. This deliberate and anonymous interdisciplinarity is a double-edged sword. It is a

significant strength of the piece whilst also comprising some of its shortcomings, for it becomes easy for the reader to lose sight of those original theoretical and political aims that are articulated so vividly in the introductory section.

This aside, the *Book of Anonymity* must be viewed as an outstanding and unique contribution to the study of anonymity that advances our technological, social, political, and cultural understanding of anonymity and the ways in which it is championed, marginalised, cajoled, and experienced in everyday life. The book is perhaps best viewed as a starting point for further investigation, an invitation to examine anonymity in its multiplicities and to begin working through the assorted configurations and manifestations that each contribution outlines. In privileging anonymity, much needed attention has been paid to a concept that is at the heart of human sociality.