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REVIEW

Érik Bordeleau, *Foucault Anonymat* (Montréal: Le Quartanier, 2012), ISBN: 978-2-923400-90-7

A thin volume, just under 100 pages, Érik Bordeleau's *Foucault Anonymat* is a real essay in the classical sense of the term. It does not systematically contextualize Foucault's account of anonymity within the history of philosophy. In fact, it does not offer a comprehensive account of anonymity in Foucault's corpus at all, although it does move more or less chronologically across his work. Instead, Bordeleau's *Foucault Anonymat*, is a wide-ranging exploration of a single, rich concept in relationship to a similarly multi-faceted thinker. But this is not all. In the spirit of Foucault, the book aims to serve as a lancet, a Molotov cocktail, or a siege tunnel,¹ to unlock the potential of Foucauldian anonymity and detonate it beneath some of our most sacred categories: politics and identity, ethics and voice. Bordeleau thus turns the essay genre into a tool of resistance against today's sectarian, identitarian politics, which—in his estimation—is drained of any real space for collective action.

In this vein, Bordeleau proceeds with five chapters or five points of attack. Chapter 1, "L'art de vivre, c'est de tuer la psychologie," is a quick pass through the contemporary cultural landscape of anonymity. From the Zapatistas and Occupy to Anonymous and Legion, the Biblical demon, Bordeleau considers the nature and possibilities of anonymity. Each instance, for Bordeleau, signifies the political force of an unknown quantity. It is not merely collective practice that marks their resistance but, more fundamentally, collective anonymity. This must be truer of resistance today, he suggests, than of any era before:

To the degree that our epoch [...] is dominated by a government of individualization that threatens and impoverishes our experience of community, wouldn't we have to look for the springboard of [Foucault's] analyses of modes of subjectification—if these are really anchored in practices of resistance—in some kind of experience of the impersonal and the anonymous? (27).

Foucault knew the power of collective resistance quite well. For him, it did not merely hold political promise, but comprised the ethical mode of life. Thus, when he writes, "the art of living is the art of killing psychology, of creating with oneself and with others unnamed

¹ Michel Foucault, "Sur la sellette" [1975], *Dits et Ecrits I*, 1954-1975 (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 152, 1593.

individualities, beings, relations, and qualities,"² he underscores not only the relational but the anonymous character of practices of the self.

Up until this point, Bordeleau contends, scholars have not adequately understood or appreciated Foucault's call to anonymity. This failure is the result of a widespread endorsement of identity politics, so well championed, he says, by queer theory and multiculturalism in the US. According to Bordeleau, the likes of Judith Butler and Rey Chow have stymied our reading of Foucault, making us "lose sight of the problems of attachment to identity" (31) and keeping us from "getting free" of it (32). While I understand Bordeleau's rejection of sectarianism, particularly in light of his commitment to activism through collective anonymity, his claim here fails to account for the anti-essentialist ways in which queer and critical race theorists have conceptualized identity and self-transformation, let alone coalition building and collective action. But it also appears insensitive to the fact that Foucault's own social identities, as the nodal points of institutionalized forces, intimately informed his thinking of anonymity. On the one hand, as a white French male, social anonymity was more feasible and freeing for Foucault than for someone from a highly visible and yet unacknowledged population. On the other hand, as a homosexual and an intellectual, anonymity—and its companion invisibility—was something he found as desirable as it was impossible. Theorizing any concept from a Foucauldian perspective, I would argue, requires identifying the social positions that make a resistant practice like anonymity thinkable—and which make it less so.

Having surveyed the field, Bordeleau moves in Chapter 2, "L'anonymat comme critique de l'intériorité privée," to trace anonymity back into the early years of Foucault's work. As one might expect, Bordeleau begins with Foucault's intellectual fascination with theorists and writers of the limit experience, for whom language became a medium of self-dissolution. Drawing on Nietzsche (46), Bataille (37), Blanchot, and Mallarmé (43), Foucault develops an account of the subject as a social production,³ one that can, especially through the experience of language, be ruptured and dissolve into radical anonymity:

The *experimentum linguae*, the experience of language as such, threatens the speaking subject: it dissolves its apparent unity and weakens the evidence of an absolute interiority into which the subject could withdraw. Conversely, the being of language appears in itself only through the disappearance of the subject (44).

It is at this point that Bordeleau I think helpfully develops a triumvirate of anonymities across Foucault's three periods. Before there is ever an *experiential* anonymity (engaged as an ethos, a form of life) or a *strategic* anonymity (engaged as a tactic of resistance) (19), there is an *ecstatic* anonymity. Ecstatic anonymity "implies a release from the henceforth obsolete

² Michel Foucault, "Conversation avec Werner Schroeter" [1982], *Dits et Ecrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), no. 308, 1075.

³ Michel Foucault, "Par-delà le bien et le mal" [1971], *Dits et Ecrits I*, no. 98, 1094.

form of personal interiority, one that ultimately makes oneself available to new possibilities of existence and being-in-community" (42).

Turning from the ecstatic to the strategic in Chapter 3, "Murmure et combat," Bordeleau asserts that Foucault's desire for depersonalization through writing is, according to his own testimony, also a desire to join in collective struggle. As Foucault famously put it in *The Archeology of Knowledge* and "The Discourse on Language," he writes "'in order to have no face'" (50) and he speaks hoping that "'speech would proceed from me, while I stood in its path—a slender gap—the point of its possible disappearance'" (52). Such statements appear to espouse one individual's self-effacement in language and no more. But Foucault also asserts, in "Sur la sellette," that "'writing interests me only to the degree that it becomes part of the reality of a struggle'" (57). According to Bordeleau, all three testaments are consonant because the very structure of being lost in language mirrors that of being lost in collective action. For Bordeleau, this is borne out in the anti-documentary *Get Rid of Yourself*, a self-described "encounter with emerging non-instituted or identity-less forms of protest that refuse the representational politics of the official Left."⁴ At one point, the film states: "You go. You are lost. [...] You go, with no idea of who you are. [...] Go follow the paths. If you were not so lost, you'd have no destiny for encounters."⁵ Bordeleau reads sentiments like these as echoes of Foucault's remarks before the Collège de France. While I am intrigued by this reading and sympathetic to interpretations that resist periodization, more work needs to be done to connect language and politics, literature and activism, individual and collective anonymity.

While nascent in his early work, anonymity's potential as a technique of struggle becomes actualized in Foucault's activism of the 1970's. As Bordeleau states in Chapter 4, "Résister en personne," Foucault "turns his attention from literary issues to practices of political resistance properly so-called. This evolution coincides in great part with his engagement in the GIP, Le Groupe d'information sur les prisons" (67). The GIP aimed to agitate the public around prison issues by gathering and disseminating information from prisoners. Unit-ing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, their families, as well as intellectuals and professionals on the outside, the GIP produced flyers, pamphlets, and reports written collectively and anonymously. Citing Beckett, Bordeleau suggests it did not matter who was speaking but rather that speech occurred, that word got out, that prison became a problem (86). On this basis, he makes the intriguing claim that Foucauldian *re-sistance* is best understood as *con-sistance* (72). It requires collective action and anonymity, through which individuals are submerged into multiplicitous forces.

If the GIP really signals Foucault's own politicization of anonymity, and I would agree with Bordeleau that this is arguably the case, then it deserves greater attention than the text affords. While it is quite true that the GIP deployed anonymity as a tactic of resistance, the landscape here is more complicated. First, it really mattered who was speak-

⁴ "Get Rid of Yourself", Bernadette Corporation, 2003.

<http://www.bernadettecorporation.com/getrid.htm>. Accessed April 24, 2015.

⁵ Ibid.

ing. The GIP aimed to amplify the voices of prisoners, as those least acknowledged and yet most affected by the prison system. Second, the GIP also utilized the names of its public intellectuals to protect others involved and to mask the size of the group itself. They report:

It was understood that three people, with some notoriety, would be put in the spotlight — people who had to employ a certain etiquette and hide how things happened, hiding above all the fact that there was nothing to hide, that there was no organization. It was crucial that the penitentiary administration not even know whether or not there was organization.⁶

The GIP's use of collective anonymity therefore existed in a much larger context where prisoners' voices were privileged and the attribution of a name could be as revolutionary as the lack of a name. If indeed Foucault's politics of anonymity was forged in the fires of the GIP, it cannot be divorced from the politics of naming. Bordeleau would do well to balance his endorsement of anonymity accordingly.

Foucault Anonymat draws to a close in Chapter 5, "Acérer la vie: la question du frottement." Bordeleau states that his ultimate goal throughout the text was to demonstrate "that the question of anonymity in Foucault consists not in pitting anonymity against identity, requiring us to simply do away with names and naming, so much as in problematizing the processes of subjectivation that stem from our relationships to *dispositifs*" (93). For Bordeleau, the Foucauldian call to anonymity is never simply to disappear, wander off, or opt out. Nor is it merely the summons to lose ourselves in the abyss of language or to renounce our name and join the resistance. It is, instead, the invitation to a sustained life of anonymity, one that consistently "guarantee[s] the possibility of friction" (99). Such a life works at every turn to resist the forces that confine and over-determine us in a biopolitical, neoliberal age. As such, it must counter the gravitational force of *homo economicus* at the individual and collective level. From this perspective, each form of anonymity—ecstatic, strategic, and experiential—requires the other and all forms are equally political, elements in a greater struggle. Foucault's early dabbling in linguistic ecstasy, his late endorsement of ethical depersonalization, and his political activism really must be interpreted alongside one another (85). And *Foucault Anonymat* does just that.

In the preface to *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault speaks of the essay as a platform through which one might get free of oneself (91). Bordeleau's essay, *Foucault Anonymat*, certainly permits the concept of Foucauldian anonymity to get free of its own stereotype as a cheap self-renunciation. Nevertheless, the essay maintains Foucault as an authorial anchor for the investigation. This means the text is a bit at war with its own impetus. On the one hand, it does not quite slip out from beneath Foucault's shadow, although it employs rich cultural and theoretical references beyond him. On the other hand, it does not offer a full treatment of the concept of anonymity in Foucault's work. At its best, *Foucault Anonymat* is a provocation, a gauntlet. Leveled at scholars and students, activists and theorists alike, it

⁶ François Colcombet, Antoine Lazarus, and Louis Appert, "Luttes autour des prisons" [1979], *Dits et Écrits II*, no. 273, 810. These three people of "some notoriety" were likely Jean-Marie Domenach, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who assumed leadership of the GIP at its inception.

assaults us with questions. What are the resources in queer and critical race theory to conceptualize collective anonymity? Where does the similarity between the structure of linguistic and political anonymity break down? What more might the GIP do to reframe our understanding of Foucauldian anonymity? Is anonymity really up to the task of resisting neoliberalism? And for whom will it most matter? If Bordeleau provokes, he provokes at least another text and more attention to this undoubtedly important but still under-theorized strand in Foucault's ethics, political activity, and literary experience.

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