the changing profession

Everybody's Authority

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The incursion of the unwanted thus seems to be part of the risk of thinking with others, part of the vulnerability of opening oneself, one's words and one's thoughts, to anyone who might venture upon them.

—Jodi Dean, "Blogging Theory"

Ah, the peace and quiet that follows a "block" on twitter.

—Saree Makdisi, *Twitter*

ONE DAY IN 2012, WHILE A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN WAS IN FULL SWING, I WROTE A BLOG POST AND HIT "PUBLISH." THE POST WAS pretty niche, I thought—the ninth in a series of posts that I had been tagging "puerility," all incipient ideas for a future project that would draw on childhood studies, the history of statistics, and poetics. With "puerility," I sought to describe a ludic epistemological mode that draws its power from its very willingness to disclaim power and embrace provisionality—an ambivalence often figured through, and associated with, boyhood.[1] My previous blogging on puerility had mused over the Google N-gram Viewer and the widespread propensity to describe it as a "fun" "toy," the foulmouthed parody *Twitter* account @MayorEmanuel, and Wes Anderson's 2012 film *Moonrise Kingdom*. The new post was about election predictions and a recent media flap around the statistician Nate Silver.

I was halfway down a badly damaged post–Hurricane Sandy East Coast, at a workshop at the University of Maryland, College Park, before I realized that, thanks to Silver's celebrity and a senior economist's denunciation, the piece had "jumped platforms." From my usual audience of mainly junior colleagues in the humanities, most of them known to me in person, the piece had moved to a different audience, to whom conceptual frameworks that I take for granted were both alien and offensive: the literary distinction between person and persona, the gender studies distinction between descriptive and prescriptive accounts of gendering, the history of science premise that the making of facts is social and processual. While I placidly

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took notes at the University of Maryland library, the comments—mostly anonymous and mostly angry—piled higher and higher.

What gave my esoteric "puerility" post such wide circulation, and why was that circulation particularly pronounced within a wholly unintended and (nominally) wholly unreceptive public?[2] I wish here to sketch a few conjectures on what the editors of this special section have called the "semipublic," which I will suggest is an apt term for the present phase of academic blogging. Blogging in its heyday a decade ago seemed to promise a new, potentially more democratic and more public form of academic engagement, as the historian Dan Cohen memorably explained in a 2006 post energetically titled "Professors, Start Your Blogs."[3] Yet as its costs—and their uneven distribution across classes of actors—have become increasingly visible, it has also brought more general dynamics of public discourse into relief. Far from constituting an ethereal, "virtual" realm apart, the semipublic Web seems to enact the vicissitudes of print and televisual circulation in more intensive forms, powerfully renewing questions about public and private speech and the norms that we assign to each.

Blogging was widely declared dead around 2013.[4] In the wake of the demise of the popular RSS readers *Bloglines* and *Google Reader*, blogs and the publics that they call into being have become disaggregated and redistributed across social networks (Lardinois; Green).[5] My own site analytics tell me that I no longer have a modest but steady readership driven mostly by RSS readers; instead, I have the occasional massive influx toward a particular post, driven by social networks like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Tumblr*. Under those circumstances, it was no wonder that my discontented readers in the autumn of 2012 were unaware that I'd been writing (semi)publicly about puerility for five years. Since social networks route connections through (constructed, not necessarily "authentic") identities, often putting one's department chair, one's mother, and one's high school bandmate in the flat category of "friend," they tend not to foster what Helen Nissenbaum has called "contextual integrity" (136–38).[6] "Virality"—usually restricted to a few related discursive communities—is just one possible state for any given blog post. General obscurity is a far more likely possibility, and it serves as a widely relied-on (though legally unprotected) mode of pseudoprivacy in the age of search engines and hypersurveillance. Needles in an unimaginably big haystack, we make our peace with the National Security Agency's surveillance and Google's easy access to our e-mail and personal information because we know that we are statistically unlikely to be singled out. The Google cloud service Drive explicitly makes use of this form of pseudoprivacy by offering a semipublic document-sharing option: the document is accessible to anyone in possession of the long, hard-to-guess URL, with no password; it is not *protected*, but, unindexed by search engines, it is *functionally* private. Many people treat their niche or low-readership blogs in this way—just as we might have a personal conversation with a friend while walking in a park.[7] But the general obscurity of the blog, or the narrowness of the imagined audience, is no guarantee of anything—never mind old culture-wars canards about the "exclusionary" nature of academic language (Palumbo-Liu 172). Since the diminishment of RSS and the increased importance of social sharing, it can be difficult to predict whether a given post will find a large public or no public, to say nothing of *which* public or *when*. Any given utterance or image online is latently public, even if by intention and in practice private: it is semipublic. Indeed, belated surges of attention will, zombie-like, occasionally beset a long-forgotten post, only to lapse again. I received a straggling scolding comment on that 2012 blog post just last week. Thus, the social-media-governed semipublic sphere is "un-

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canny" in Freud's sense, in which "everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (225).

Semipublicness thus reveals the complexity and difficulty that attend putting scholarship online, even when, as Cohen argues, "it's part of our duty as teachers, experts, and public servants." Michael Warner has sympathetically identified a common critique of academic writing: that it is, in a word, cowardly, failing to risk any real "orientation to strangers and the submission of discourse to estranging paths of circulation" (150). The left political theorist Jodi Dean has offered a trenchant elaboration of this stance, in the context of the comments from avowed neo-Nazis that appear in her blog comment queue. Dean's is a principled refusal to engage:

> I've never addressed White [one of the neo-Nazi commenters] directly in response. In part, I don't know what to say. It's as if his remarks shatter the presumptions and expectations that enable me to speak, exposing their specificity, their fragility, their context dependency. I also don't engage him because of a more general guideline I follow in not debating racist and anti-Semitic positions. I don't want to participate in enabling such hate to be within the parameters of the permissible.

At the same time, as Dean explains further, the very setting of such boundaries is revealing—neither simple nor self-righteous, but productively troubling, an opening up to one's real closures, contra fantasies of an ideally discursive public sphere emerging on an "open" Web.[8] As she continues:

> But White's incursion, I should probably say "participation," because unwanted, because a transgression disrupting and unsetting my expectations[,] is valuable insofar as it challenges me to take responsibility for the specificity of my practices and assumptions. I can't pretend to be inclusive, to respect all others. . . . The risk of an encounter with the unwanted and the call to take responsibility for not inviting them in, for excluding them, is thus the opening blogs provide.

Real risk and transgression are intellectually valuable, Dean points out, and yet are not unqualified goods. The semipublic nature of blogging produces an openness or "opening," but one that forces us to recognize the conditions of possibility for the discourses in which we wish to engage, and disallows the fantasy of universal accessibility that is so often attached to simplistic calls for academics to "educate the public" (Kristof). This is especially true of literary studies, to which attaches, as Rey Chow has observed, an expectation "that humanistic knowledge should continue to be universally available and relevant in the sense that everyone should be *entitled* to it (whereas the sciences and the trade professions are allowed to have much more stringent membership qualifications)" (96).[9] The liberal hope invested in academic blogging is that academic discourses are robust, not fragile; that they are not context-dependent; and that jumping platforms will do them no damage because they are essentially "universally available," and only contingently and for silly traditional reasons "locked up" in specialized journals.[10] As Dean notes, actual academic blogging practices reveal that the reverse is true: bloggers must each make a practical choice about the conditions under which they are meaningfully readable, if only in the invisible labor of comment moderation. Blogging's ability to remove certain physical barriers to access forces a confrontation with the intractability—indeed, the inevitability—of other, less arbitrary barriers.[11]

In forcing us to avow nonarbitrary terms of engagement, then, academic blogging does not operate on the model that is so often attributed to online autodidactic learning, in which a disembodied, universal subject, unencumbered by the constraints of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, or age—what the cyberlibertarian John Perry Barlow once

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celebrated as "identities [that] have no bodies"—meets an unmediated flow of information. On the contrary, the semipublic practice of academic blogging recenters the questions of embodiment that have always attended conceptions of the public. Although, as the famous *New Yorker* cartoon quips, "[o]n the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," Warner points out that "[p]ublic and private are bound up with elementary relations to . . . the body":

> Public and private are learned along with such terms as "active" and "passive," "front" and "back," "top" and "bottom." They can seem quasi-natural, visceral, fraught with perils of abjection and degradation or, alternatively, of cleanliness and self-mastery. They are the very scene of selfhood and scarcely distinguishable from the experience of gender and sexuality. (24)

The semipublic, which toggles so easily between public and private, visible and obscure, is thus deeply implicated in the enforcement of rapidly shifting, contextual norms of embodiment, especially of sex, gender, race, disability, and age. Thus, the Silicon Valley cultural critic Shanley Kane has argued that being labeled "public" on the Internet is frequently no more than an excuse for the abuse of those whose bodies misalign with dominant expectations of what should be public: "for the rest of us, with visibility comes harassment, stalking, threats, loss of career opportunity and mobility, constant public humiliation, emotional and sometimes physical violence." As Marilee Lindemann has observed, anonymity, pseudonymity, and outright fictionality—strategies for being private-in-public—have long been the protections of those whose right to address a public is in question (211). For this reason, the early *Google+* policy of requiring its users to go by "real names" attracted a great deal of controversy and critique: social media are where such protections are most needed (MacKinnon and Lim; boyd, "'Real Names' Policies"). In this context, with utterance and its circulation so closely identified with the circulation of bodies, utterances routinely operate as proxies for bodies, able to give and receive aggression—yet whether they are understood as aggressors or targets of aggression is contextual and positional.

Numerous critics have shown how profoundly perceptions about embodiment affect what is understood as legitimately or illegitimately public, including online.[12] To be semipublic has costs—the costs of the incursions Dean describes—and they are borne disproportionately by those whose nonnormative embodiment qualifies their perceived right to address a public, even when their semipublic utterances were never intended for a wide audience. For example, Medieval PoC, the pseudonymous blogger who runs the art history Tumblr *People of Color in European Art History*, receives regular antiblack hate mail and other harassment that assumes the blogger is African American ("Moment").[13] The blog primarily posts images of medieval and early modern artworks that depict people of color, countering an erroneous belief that there was ever a "pure," all-white Europe. In many ways it is an ideal instance of academic blogging: accessible, yet offering a resource that is not otherwise widely available. But in some arenas (specifically the message board *Reddit*), this is evidently enough to incite assumptions about the author's body and denounce its presence in the online semipublic sphere.[14] Merely being perceived as nonnormatively embodied online is all too often treated as a transgression warranting punishment. As one of Medieval PoC's harassers frames it:

> We aren't the ones digging up this [personal] information: it's already there. We just collect it. Anything that happens to them [Medieval PoC and other bloggers] in terms of harassment is entirely their fault: we cannot be held responsible for them deciding to make a "target" of themselves by their own volition. If you

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> thrust yourself into the public sphere in the manner that medieval pock [*sic*] does, then you deal with whatever shit comes about as a result of that. (Medieval PoC, Online posting)

The semipublic act of posting examples of people of color in medieval European art is thus reinterpreted as an active breach of bodily norms: as putting a person of color's body in a public place where it does not belong and arrogating to it a public that it does not deserve. "[I]t's . . . there" (somewhere on the Internet, where you can look at it or not, as you choose) quickly and insidiously becomes "thrust[ing] yourself into the public sphere" (illegitimately). In other words, to extend Warner's point, to violate norms of public and private is to breach deeply held norms about bodies in space and in relation to one another, *and vice versa* (Warner 24–25). And yet, since such norms are contextual and degrees of privacy and publicity are not knowable in advance, the semipublic realm continually produces and propagates ambiguities around just those norms.

This may explain why charges of immodest, uncivil, attention-seeking (i.e., striving for an out-of-order publicness), and inappropriate so regularly attend online discourse, most recently in the University of Illinois's controversial dehiring of Professor Steven Salaita, apparently in response to once obscure (but now widely and carefully parsed) tweets that were judged to be, as Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise put it, "disrespectful" (Dunn; Jaschik). A constant state of "Schrödinger's publicness" means that online utterances are enormously prone to being perceived as violating social norms. Even Cohen's 2006 call takes refuge in the language of respectability, distancing academic blogging from the improper utterances of "self-involved, insecure, oversexed teens and twentysomethings." Some utterances (by minors, pertaining to sexuality, personal), Cohen suggests, are by nature private, and we are right to shrink from their bad publicness on blogs. Unlike these instances, however, Cohen argues, academic blogs don't inappropriately place something personal in public view. They need not threaten the academic norm in which *public* broadly means "published" (usually peer-reviewed) and therefore trustworthy: "[T]here's good and bad obsession. What the critics of blogs are worried about is the bad kind—the obsession that drives people to write about their breakfast in excruciating detail. Yet . . . obsession—properly channeled and focused on a worthy subject—has its power. It forges experts." Cohen thus explicitly links expertise with a congeniality to preexisting structures of epistemological stability that the historian of science Steven Shapin has described as "civility."[15] Such social markers, Shapin argues, are far from trivial; they constitute the very conditions of knowledge production (xxvi, 36). If, online, nobody knows you're a dog—that is, it is difficult to know who is trustworthy—academic blogs, Cohen reassures the skeptics, can shore up the markers of civility that cue our sense of the appropriately public and private.

Cohen's suggestion—explicitly made in the context of RSS's then rising prominence—that academic blogging can almost always successfully reproduce other media's markers of civility (i.e., of trustworthiness) is belied by the semipublic nature of today's social Web and the platform jumping it facilitates. We can see the instability of such markers in Dean's encounter with neo-Nazi commenters and her subsequent avowal of the need to restrict the terms of engagement. We can also see it in the harassment experienced by Medieval PoC, which treats the author as a transgressor simply for being "there" while (ostensibly) nonwhite. Likewise, when I inadvertently engaged a much less distant public of economists and fans of economists, basic premises like the sociality of scientific knowledge were received as beyond the pale, no matter how many markers of academic civility (such as my real name, institutional and

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contact information, and formal citations) the blog bore. There is no performance of civility (in Shapin's sense) that does not look like incivility in another context, and the semipublic Web means that what Dean calls "the incursion of the unwanted" is nearly inevitable, whether we understand ourselves as the transgressors ("TMI," "attention-seeking," "disrespectful," inappropriately addressing a public from a body seen as inherently nonpublic) or the transgressed upon (such as the many bloggers and comment moderators who encounter substantial hate speech and threats of violence [Wilson]).

Because performances of academic civility are only legible in particular contexts, the fantasy of a universal, context-independent civility—whether a good-faith aspiration aimed at increasing access to scholarship, as in Cohen's version, or a selectively applied tool for curtailing academic freedom—is ultimately unavailable to the semipublic intellectual. Meanwhile, other approaches to the challenges of the semipublic have emerged online. The hyperironized, performatively oversharing aesthetics of many *Tumblr* accounts and "weird Twitter"—shared, not coincidentally, with the erstwhile Internet-oriented poetic practice known as flarf—intentionally exploits the anxieties raised by semipublicness (Herrman; Bernstein). Although hyperbolic performativity is not often a good option for academic bloggers, it points a way forward, or at least onward. Recognizing in advance that the Web is not a Habermasian public sphere of rational discourse, such performances reveal all utterances as vulnerable and in some way, as the poet Gary Sullivan has described flarf, "not okay" (Bernstein). The answer is not to aspire to the fiction of a universal civility, and still less to shun what Warner calls "the necessary risk of publicness" by evading online discourse altogether (151). Rather, the uncanny, temporally messy, shifting quality of the semipublic suggests that what is needed is less a social media policy than a poetics, one that avows and works creatively with its own constraints.

Notes

Many thanks to Miriam Posner and Liliana Loofbourow for helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

1. Leslie Fiedler's "bad boy" is an obviously related figure.

2. I say "(nominally) wholly unreceptive" because readers left so many comments telling me how very unreceptive they were, while at the same time vigorously visiting, linking, and generating heated discourse both in my comment stream and elsewhere on the Web, much in the manner of the bourgeois talking about not talking about sex (Foucault 17).

3. I am leaving aside, for the purposes of this essay, the important question of academic blogging's contribution to the culture of unpaid academic overwork and "always-on" engagement (Bowles; Nguyen).

4. Hardaway; Kabadayi; Kottke, "R.I.P." and "Blog"; Tracy. Insert joke here about writing about academic blogging for *PMLA* a year after blogging was declared dead.

5. RSS is a method for distributing online material to readers as it is published so that they don't have to visit Web sites and retrieve it. It was speculated that *Google Reader* was specifically cannibalized by Google's new social network, *Google+* (Eaton).

6. Aaron Bady has written usefully about the *Facebook* CEO Mark Zuckerberg's avowed hostility to contextual integrity. Danah boyd, studying young people's uses of social media, has noted that "[f]or many of the teens I interviewed, Facebook was the primary place where friend groups collide. Other services—like Tumblr or Twitter—were more commonly used by teens who were carving out their place in interest-driven communities" (*It's* 39).

7. As Miriam Posner pointed out to me, unlike Google docs, blogs are usually indexed by search engines, a distinction that reveals the varying degrees of privacy by obscurity that operate on the Web.

8. Cass Sunstein usefully reviews some social-scientific literature on the shortcomings of deliberative discourse as a decision-making procedure.

9. The nature of scientific authority in relation to the popular and the public is also widely misconstrued (Daum).

10. This is not to discount the admirable goals of open-access journals but rather to distinguish between different kinds of accessibility. The moralizing tenor of much recent debate around open access too often elides nonarbitrary barriers to access.

11. As Nissenbaum points out, "Almost everything—things that we do, events that occur, transactions that

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take place—happens in a context not only of place but of politics, convention, and cultural expectation" (136). Social media promote movements out of context.

12. boyd, *It's*; McMillan Cottom; Nakamura; Nakamura and Chow-White.

13. Medieval PoC has given interviews using her real name. See Demby.

14. Medieval PoC, "[Censored Slurs]" and Online posting.

15. Civility has a long and contentious history in academic-freedom debates (*On Collegiality*).

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