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ADOLESCENCE AND THE NARRATIVE COMPLEXITIES OF ONLINE LIFE: ON THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF YOUTUBE'S ANONYGIRL1

Roger Saul

Abstract

This article examines the public YouTube profile of AnonyGirl1, the pseudonym used by a teenaged girl who takes to YouTube to narrate various aspects of her life. Using AnonyGirl1's case as an object of analysis, the article considers the new narrative flexibilities that are shaping young people's online explorations of self. On YouTube, where narrative linearity and fixity often come undone, AnonyGirl1 creates herself as a chimera of disappearing and reappearing video fragments that comprise an unstable, constantly changing entirety. In making and unmaking herself in fragments, AnonyGirl1 calls into question the presumed coherences of predominant youth narratives, negotiates her views about being young, and articulates processes of interior self-making through a mode of social expression that gives new form to its fluidities. Although the surfeit of narrative choices that AnonyGirl1 has at her disposal on YouTube come with a series of pleasures, the possibilities for self-construction that these choices provoke also come with debilitating pressures and confusions that she scrambles to negotiate. Amidst these pleasures and confusions, AnonyGirl1's narrative offers a venue through which educators can think through the emerging complexities of young people's online self-making practices.

Keywords: youth, adolescence, YouTube, online identity, post modern identity, narrative, new media

Introduction

On August 17, 2008, a black, female, 18 year-old Londoner who, under the pseudonym AnonyGirl1, had up to then made countless YouTube videos documenting her life since the age of 16 (videos that she coded sequentially so that visitors to her YouTube channel page could easily encounter her at various stages of her life), made an emotional address via YouTube that shocked many of her regular viewers. Her first few sentences captured the thrust of her message: "Hi, as some of you may know I've kind of announced that I'm leaving the AnonyGirl1 channel... I want to go. I want to go. I want to go.... I feel like the channel is based on someone I'm not anymore." To this she added that she had already taken the step of deleting from YouTube all of her past videos, and that she would refrain from making any new ones for the indefinite future. In essence, she was announcing her erasure as AnonyGirl1.

This erasure proved temporary. Although having cited a slew of reasons for her disenchantment with YouTube – among them, the personal toll taken by the negative posts she was receiving about her videos, the suggestions that YouTube was no longer fun and that her older videos no longer reflected "the real me," as well as her consequent desire to eventually make a 'new' start with videos that better reflected the self she wished to project – she nonetheless invited viewers to weigh in on which of her past videos they liked most, suggesting that she might take their feedback into account

in reposting a few among them that best reflected her desired self. She eventually reposted twenty such videos. When taken together, this new collection of videos – comprising some older and some more recent ones – created an instantly altered persona, swiftly reshaping her public, online narrative.¹

Drawing upon these twenty videos as objects of study, this paper suggests that entrenched notions of adolescent development are coming under assault – productively so – courtesy of many young people's public, online identity work. This work enables public stories of self to be created and recreated according to endlessly altering formulations and reformulations. In the online world – which is less constrained by the ordering mechanisms of space and materiality, and where the splicing together of simulations and events can lead to a loss of chronological order and context-dependent sequences (Eriksen, 2007; Karsten, 2007) – the ways in which we make ourselves is altered. These are not necessarily grand alterations – in the case of young people like AnonyGirl1, these alterations function as a series of narrative disruptions that arguably signal a new iteration in the social construction of adolescence, one in need of continued inquiry given the proliferation of online subject-making practices carried out by young people. For educators in particular, conducting said inquiries serves an important function: it contributes to knowledge making about the changing needs and practices of education's most important subject – the subject who learns.

That online life offers individuals fluid modes of identity expression is by now hardly a novel suggestion, but what online video collections like those of AnonyGirl1 newly offer us is a series of commentaries about the classificatory impositions with which we have taken to constructing many modern social categories, adolescence among them. Online expressions of self offer us a partial glimpse beyond these impositions by elucidating the hybridities that perhaps precede the neat categorising imperatives that are a condition of these constructions. To this extent, the work of defining and delineating how young people like AnonyGirl1 elaborate upon such impositions in their videos – by sharing what they can look like, why it might be important to think about them, and what their enactments might mean for how we make sense of adolescence as a socially constructed category in our contemporary moment – is the work of this paper. What follows, then, is an exploration of adolescent subject making practices as seen through the case of one young person's – Anonygirl1's – public YouTube narrative, wherein she inspires a series of compelling entanglements through which to think through the new narrative complexities enacted by young people's online communicative practices.

Adolescence and the Current Media Moment

I am particularly interested in making sense of AnonyGirl1 according to the conditions of our current media moment, which Rattansi (1994) has long since suggested consists of, “The almost instantaneous, often ‘live’ transmission of images,” which, “now have the effect... of... producing even greater incoherencies in the public narratives and images of time and space through which individuals and ‘local’ communities can create secure identities” (p. 33). His quote augurs how the dizzying speeds with which many of us now customarily transmit information between one another, and the myriad platforms we now have for doing so, can provoke new kinds of personal and social relations, not to mention new explanatory strategies for making sense of them.

Counted among these relations are those we make with ourselves. Which is to say that among the consequences of our participation in current methods of mediated communication – the pervasiveness and intensities of which increasingly work to render the material and the virtual inextricable within our everyday realities – are possibilities

for experiencing new ways of being in the world. On the Internet, Bratich (2006) suggests, human subjects are more nomadic and flexible, whereby the “individual is characterised in micro-capacities to divide and distribute itself in continuous variation” (p. 71). These conditions put the notion that we are wholly coherent selves with stable interiorities, rather than technological “variables to be modified in their relationship to each other” (Bratich, 2006, p. 71; Foucault, 2003/1982), under strain.

Rattansi (1994) offers an interesting delineative that helps deepen the claims of the latter. In a particular take on what has often been called the ‘postmodern turn’ – i.e. the “decentering and de-essentialising [of] both subjects and the social” (p. 15) evoked here – Rattansi eschews this ‘turn’ and reconstitutes it as a ‘frame,’ a simple play on words that arguably portends a particular set of implications for understanding what this postmodern media moment is and means. For here a “postmodern frame” implies not a move *away* from, as does a ‘postmodern turn’, but rather a move *toward*; toward a more acute mode of looking at an already existing set of processes. In other words, Rattansi (1994) suggests to us that our various formulations for making sense of what now seem like pervasive processes of ‘decentering and de-essentialising subjects and the social’ should not so much be concerned with the supposition that these processes somehow signal a move in the direction of anti-foundationalism (p. 17), but rather with how these processes can allow us to scrutinise the modernising acts from which they evolve, and, for that matter, precede.

Rattansi (1994) defines modernity as an over-arching analytical category of classifications around which much of the world and its current meanings are staged (p. 16), and postmodernity as critical reflection on the character, foundations and limits of this staging (p. 17). The postmodern frame, he says: “... is a mode of being both inside and outside modernity, of stepping back, or out, and looking in, while still having one foot and one eye, so to speak, inside modernity.... [It is] a frame within a frame, and modernity might be regarded as being both object and subject within this frame (p. 19).

What looking through the metaphorical lens of a postmodern frame therefore suggests is the prospect of seeing what the categorising imperatives of modernity sometimes work to obscure. What it perhaps allows us to see is that human subjects are not singular or timeless – instead they are technologies, imaginary in form, and contextually situated; by this logic, they are also sites of hybridisation, of fusion, and of incommensurability (p. 28).

Haraway (1991) has famously called contemporary human subjects cyborgs, a term meant to connote how it is that we *embody* the particular technologies (fusions, hybridities) of our current moment. Like the postmodern frame just described, the cyborg serves as a useful metaphor in presaging the conditions from which YouTube profiles like those of AnonyGirl1 emerge, for it too can be evoked as a means of critically intervening against the conditions of modernity (Bernardi, 2002, p. 155). Haraway (1991) defines a cyborg as a “kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self” (p. 163). Congruous with how “communications technologies and biotechnologies [have become] the crucial tools re-crafting our bodies” (p. 164), a cyborg therefore refers to a “hybrid of machine and organism” (p. 149), to a “creature of social reality and fiction” (p. 150). As I read Haraway, a cyborg – i.e. us, in current form - is a fiction because it is something we create. It is an assembled projection of our social and bodily selves onto various inorganic canvases – the multiple texts of our exterior lives – that we construct and are constructed by. But it is real precisely because it is us. It is, writes Haraway (1991a), “our processes, an act of our embodiment” (p. 180). In view of these entanglements, what our cyborg selves are therefore not is immutable, nor are they innocent; they are not, Haraway suggests, “born in a garden” (p. 180), a thinly veiled biblical reference that

functions as an important suggestion about the place of hybridity in our constitutions of self. Purity, immaculateness, unity and fixity are abandoned according to such constitutions, abandoned in favour of conceiving of human subjects as “hybrids, mosaics, chimeras....” (p. 177).

All of this has consequences for how we understand adolescence as a category of modernity. Whereas what we now understand as adolescence did not exist as a universally defined social category in pre-modern societies, France (2007) writes that uneven boundaries between different age groups always have; they were generally separated along lines of dependence (child), semi-dependence (young adult) and independence (adult). Early conceptions of “youth” eventually evolved out of these categories, but these separations were not perceived or administered according to ways we might conceive today. Notions of modern day psycho-social development based on age specificities were not universally recognised. Definitions of youth were locally defined and varied according to roles and responsibilities within the local purview of family, work, community and related markers (D’Eramo, p. 2003).

Most trace conceptions of adolescence, a modern iteration of youth premised on universal assumptions about its presumed characteristics as a temporal “life stage” (Goosens, 2006), to the work of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, who in 1904 wrote the two-volume book, *Adolescence*. In it, Hall put forward a universalised temporal definition of adolescence, connected to puberty, and characterised by the “storm and stress” of a series of emotional upheavals. His work helped make popular the notion that adolescence is a naturally occurring developmental stage of *predictable* cognitive and behavioural attributes across time and place, that adolescents (and thus societies) have to be protected from their acute susceptibilities to corrupting influences (emerging sexuality, unstable behavioural urges, social ills), that these susceptibilities only ease with their proper departure into a more emotionally stable phase, adulthood, and that proper care for the young is intimately tied to broader popular concerns about the ‘healthy’ development of society and its corresponding markers (the state of the nation, the evolutionary ‘progress’ of its people, the sovereign realisation of national imperial ambitions, racial purity, the advance of civilisation, and so on (Lesko, 1996, 2001)).

In their more contemporary iterations, social constructions of adolescence have been embodied in the form of the ‘teenager,’ a term some suggest probably appears for the first time in the early 1940s (Danesi, 1994; Graham, 2004) Born largely out of marketing and advertising strategies that sought to capitalise on the spending power and leisure time of increasingly large numbers of post-war youth (Graham, 2004, p. 26; France, 2007, p. 16), markets of and for ‘teenagers’ were created, mostly in the ‘West,’ and the ‘teen years’ were increasingly narrated in the popular imaginary as constituting a distinct phase of life where young people could be more or less “assumed to act, think, and behave in specific ways” (Danesi, 1994, p. 140). These narrations vacillated between intense anxieties about what was assumed to be the explosion of a ‘youth culture,’ which comprised young people who were defining themselves through their new leisure time and were presumed to be in need of protection from its offerings, and celebrations of youthfulness based on now familiar images of idealism. ‘Culture industries’ such as film, music, fashion and television increasingly sought to both create and cater to teenage needs through representations of and for them, so that the growth of these industries and the teenagers that made active meanings of their productions helped to form each other (Danesi, 1994, p. 15-22).

By now challenges to social constructions of being young are commonplace, and much scholarly work has been devoted to the project of ‘denaturalising’ youth, adolescence and/or the teenager (Lesko, 1996). In this regard, the social construction of modern adolescence as a distinct life stage, or the processes by which the temporal

boundaries of adolescence have come to be defined and reified over time, has been convincingly linked to a range of other phenomena in many Western societies, most prominent among them: urbanisation and industrialisation, which has traditionally resulted in shrinking families; the creation of middle and leisure classes, and with these factors the temporal extension of the category adolescence (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 329); public reactions to industrial child-labour practices, the effects of which often help to “legislate youth into existence” (France, 2007, p. 11; Danesi, 2003, p. 5); the rise of the modern statehood, an occurrence usually accompanied by the centralised administration of populations, and therefore by imperatives to create adolescence as a category according to the concomitant “biological determinisms of politics” (D’Eramo, 2003; Pillow, 2004); and the growth of compulsory education, which has traditionally given young people access to resources not solely determined by work, and which in its implementation has usually resulted in prolonged notions of childhood and adolescence (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 331). All of these works suggest that adolescence is not a stable category but a fluid one, subject to altered and altering definitions depending on history and context (Mallan & Pearce, 2003).

Introducing Anonygirl1

As an educator interested in how new youth cultural practices are challenging long standing discourses and definitions of being young (Saul, 2010; Saul, 2012), I became interested in AnonyGirl1’s work precisely because of how it seems to challenge entrenched popular cultural definitions of adolescence. An introduction to AnonyGirl1’s YouTube profile would be useful here.

AnonyGirl1 identifies herself a vlogger (i.e. a video blogger), and the aesthetic character of her videos is usually similar: she sits and speaks directly to the camera that faces her – the camera from which we view her – in a series of long takes with few edits, changes in perspective or stylistic variances. She always presents the same self in her videos (as opposed to the identity experimentations other YouTube vlogger’s at times use the site to perform, see Wesch, 2008; Saul, 2012), and in them she charts the events and emotions that shape her life, shares her various opinions as they arise, and aims to entertain and interact with others. Embedded in these practices is what appears to be a series of underlying values – she utilises YouTube, at times to the point of seeming pretence, to project a continually happy self, to court fame, to show off the skills that she perceives can prompt her fame (usually singing), and to more broadly communicate with a range of anonymous others as a means of carrying out these aspirations.

Many of her videos take on a sense of excitement about the cross-cultural accidents, communicative discrepancies, and differences in point of view that can arise on a social platform of YouTube’s scope and reach (see ‘AnonyGirl1 Appendix’ 7 July, 2007; 11 February, 2008; 12 May, 2008; 31 July, 2008). And yet underlying these evocations of excitement, it seems, is a more deep-seated desire on the part of AnonyGirl1 – namely, that her videos be seen as the source of these excitements and the entertainments that they might provide. In other words, if AnonyGirl1 sees communicating on YouTube as a novel source of pleasure and entertainment (i.e. “a place where we can talk about whatever we want, whenever we want,” (31 July, 2008)), then her videos show that she wants to be seen as the source of that pleasure, wants to locate herself at its centre. Accordingly, this desire often translates into an projection of self that sees her take on a persona of exaggerated cheerfulness; it is as if she thinks that doing so might further work to cement her videos as a source of pleasure, to the extent that she works hard to manage others’ perceptions of her videos as such (20 April, 2007; 12 May, 2007; 6 June, 2007; 10 June, 2007).

That said, what seems to underlie AnonyGirl1's desire to be seen as happy, as well as her desire for her videos to be seen as a source of pleasure, is a desire to be seen at all. In this regard, her self-display – which comes across as being as much motivated by seeing herself reflected on YouTube as by being seen by others – is a recurring thread in her videos (12 June, 2007; 28 August, 2007; 18 February, 2008).

Correspondingly, one of the things AnonyGirl1 wants from YouTube, indeed one of the reasons she makes videos, is a desire for some sort of renown. She wants to be famous, and she sees YouTube, with its broad scope and reach, as a platform for achieving fame (28 August, 2007; 1 November, 2007; 27 January, 2008; 26 June, 2007), and for more broadly achieving some ascendancy toward greater popularity and prestige.

Eventually – and there is to my knowledge no indication that she ever reaches any sort of fame beyond the peripheries of her online profile – AnonyGirl1 seems to come to grips with the fact that her YouTube videos will not make her famous, and she moves toward negotiating the consequences of this realisation (5 November, 2007). This initiates what perhaps becomes a series of deeper engagements by her of her views not only of her changing self, but also of the heretofore unexpressed by her (and perhaps unseen by her) ways in which various discourses of adolescence – and specifically various socially and culturally sanctioned narratives of adolescence – have operated to inform her expressions of self on YouTube (as well as her conceptions of herself) in ways she had not realised. To this end, in her video “Why is it so hard to accept that maybe were [sic] just normal?” (5 November, 2007) she states:

You know there's this weird statistic that says 90 percent of teenagers think they're going to grow up and be famous. Well, it's actually pretty much true. And I will admit, I'm pretty much in that 90 percent. Well not now, a lot less now, now I've kind of grown up and realised I'm not gonna be the next Madonna... But – when I was like 15, I swear to God, literally in my head, no doubt about it, I thought I was going to be famous.”

To her own observation she then responds:

Why do they actually think they're gonna be famous...I thought about it and I thought...No the real question is... the real question we should be asking is why is it so hard to accept that maybe we're just meant to be normal.... Nothing wrong with it so I don't understand why it's really hard to accept.... I really don't know what it is. And if anyone can help me accept my normality, then please go ahead.

AnonyGirl1 negotiates social narratives of adolescence

With the preceding quotes, AnonyGirl1 signals what comes to form an important thread in her videos. Namely, as a function of exploring her emerging questions about herself (“can anyone help me accept my normality?”), she starts to interrogate her role within the broader social narratives of adolescence that she imagines herself to be wrapped-up in. What becomes a project of working to destabilise parts of her own YouTube narrative therefore becomes inextricably linked with a project of working to destabilise the social narratives that have helped to inform it. A negotiation of Giddens' (1982) “duality of structure” comes to mind here: as AnonyGirl1 begins to poke at the presumed coherences of commonplace social constructions of adolescence – imbued as they are with well-instantiated tropes of lost innocence, instability, storm and stress,

hormonal imbalance, and identity crisis (Graham, 2004; Lesko, 2001) – she draws on YouTube to negotiate what becomes an emerging sense of the fluid parameters that inform these constructions. More so, she negotiates how she might re-imagine these parameters – and thus herself – anew. Her negotiations – in that they exemplify how one young person might draw on YouTube as a resource to critically comment upon social constructions of adolescence – seem significant if only for this reason. Yet, as we will see, they are made all the more significant because they initiate for AnonyGirl1 a series of unforeseen complications that push the narrative depths through which she constructs herself still further.

The video “Give us a chance” (17 October, 2007) offers an instance of how AnonyGirl1 goes about commenting upon cultural stereotypes about young people of concern to her. In the video’s opening shot, she looks at the camera that faces her, and from a seated position on her bed she smiles says, “Hi guys... I’m 17. Do you know what that means?” With this she moves closer to the camera and says: “Well, that probably means I’m going to pull out my hood” (she now pulls a hood over her head), “take out my shank” (she now reaches below the frame and pulls out a large meat cleaver), “and in about a half hour, I’m gonna mug you.” With this she removes her hood and puts down her “shank” before launching into an editorial style commentary on the role of the media in perpetrating cultural stereotypes casting young people as disproportionately violent (Stern, 2005; Tanner, 2001). In specifically focusing on the particulars of her local U.K context, she contextualises her claim by offering that, “According to every single U.K. paper, magazine, and everything that the government seems to say about us U.K. London teens, we’re all just part of this yob culture. And I’m pretty much here to say no, we’re really not.” As she continues to speak, she alternates between the roles of teen spokesperson (“...I’m just speaking out for every teen that isn’t part of this gangster lifestyle that the media proposes that we’re all in”) and advocate (“we’re not all so easily led like sheep... we have minds of our own”). In closing, she returns to her earlier criticisms of mainstream media by prompting her viewers to, “Just realise that what is being to you force fed to you, by the media, is not who we are.”

In another video, this one called “What is an Adult?” (12 May, 2008), AnonyGirl1 launches into a more substantive personal commentary on the inanity of what she believes to be the precarious social boundaries that define adolescence and adulthood (D’Eramo, 2003; Lesko, 2001). The video comes on the precipice of what she tells us is her upcoming eighteenth birthday. In professing to be struggling with the arbitrary abruptness of the sudden change in social position soon to be bestowed upon her by legal adulthood (“I’m going to be no different on Monday than I am right now”), she pulls out a dictionary under the guise of lending her struggles some clarity, and reads from it: “Adult: a person who is fully grown or developed or of age. Adult: having attained full size and strength. Adult: one who is legally of age. And adult... a mature person.” These definitions seem partly recited to dramatise her confusion (“Um... I don’t really know what to think of this,” she says), and they also provide fodder for her to work through the fallacies she associates with what she has just read.

For example, in response to the assertion that an adult is “a person who is fully grown or developed with age,” she criticises the presumed coherences of rigid adolescent developmental narratives of completion and arrival (“I’m not growing?” she asks rhetorically, before detailing what she indicates is the misanthropic nature of this kind of thinking (“people live until they’re like 80... to say that at 18 I’m fully grown – mentally and physically – I have to disagree”). Likewise, in response to the notion of “Having attained full size and strength,” she now employs parody as a strategy of retort – in this case she repeats the word “strength” to herself as she taps her left bicep (her

bicep is small), and we are made to understand that its feebleness evokes the opposite of physical strength (“So, no adult [to] that,” she concludes). She challenges the dictionary definition of an adult as a “mature person” by pointing out what she sees as its irreconcilable inconsistencies (“I’m pretty sure I know lots of people over 18 who are really immature. And I know loads of people under 18 who are way too mature”). And finally, she says, “there’s this last one, one who is legally of age,” to which she closes, “You can’t judge adulthood on maturity. You can’t judge adulthood on size, shape, attitude, umm, psychological well-being.... I just have issues with the whole coming of age thing.”

As evidenced in the videos above, AnonyGirl1, in part comes to utilise YouTube as a vehicle through which to define herself in relation to broader social imaginaries of adolescence, and through which to find a voice and an audience in doing so. For example, at the time I retrieved “Give us a Chance” (17 October, 2007), a video which was “featured” on YouTube and thus rescued from relative obscurity, it had amassed over a million video views, easily a much larger number than any of her other listed videos.ⁱⁱ AnonyGirl1 “finds a voice” on YouTube in that her participation there – what with the opportunity it provides her to be seen and heard by others clearly interested in what she has to say – seems to both embolden her to explore the kinds of issues that she does, as well as validate her reasons for caring about them (validation comes in the interest and responses she receives from others). The fact that her videos appear to her to have resonance with others further seems to embolden her to personalise the issues she speaks about – which in the videos just mentioned translate into her coming to grips with how broader social imaginaries of adolescence operate through her. For instance, her far-reaching question “why is it so hard to accept that maybe *we’re* just normal,” translates to “if anyone can help me accept *my* normality, than please go ahead” (emphasis added). As Gee (1996) suggests when he writes that, “The individual instantiates, gives body to, a Discourse every time he or she acts or speaks, and thus carries it, and ultimately changes it, through time” (p. 145), she seems to articulate these imaginaries as a means of negotiating and challenging them.

Of course, AnonyGirl1’s articulations along these grounds are also fraught with contradictions, and do not come as neatly packaged or coherent critiques of predominant discourses of adolescence. For example in frequently holding to what “teens” are not, she often ends up making a case for what they are. When, for example, she assumes the role of spokesperson and states, “*We’re* not all criminals,” or “*we...* deserve the respect to be treated like normal people” (emphases added), she is engaging in a similar sort of grand classification that she criticises mainstream media of perpetrating. In articulating how and what teens are not, in other words, she is implicitly making a case for what they are, absent the recognition of how such a stance might be equally confining (Yon, 2000, p. 102). By the same token, in her sweeping attack on “media,” an apparently monolithic entity in her formulation, she ignores that she too exists in a mediated space as she makes her comments, and so appears incognisant about how the space she operates within might likewise help to shape the expressions she creates. Still the more pressing point I wish to highlight here is that her attempts at taking a critical stance in questioning social constructions of adolescence seem, on the whole, enabled and empowered by her participation on YouTube. In view of the communicative possibilities YouTube offers her she is therefore able, through her videos, to speak to and for young people in a way that fulfills its suggested promise of being, in her words, “a place where we can talk about whatever we want, whenever we want” (31 July, 2008).

And yet, in drawing on YouTube to express her views about the world and her place in it, and in inviting others to share their views about what she says, AnonyGirl1 soon

finds herself in the position of shielding the narrative she has constructed from a series of incursions she does not seem to have anticipated. In somewhat of an irony, then, when she achieves a modicum of fame within the parameters of YouTube's community (which, again, from early on seemed an implicit desire), the consequences of achieving it become unsettling for her. More so, they lead her to seek a different kind of experience from YouTube – again, one that further pushes, in ways unforeseen, the narrative parameters through which she works to make herself.

The most prescient example of what seems to unsettle her, an example that foreshadows the discussion that follows, comes in the video “the morning after the night before” (19 October, 2007). This video takes its name in reference the prior video “Give us a chance” (which recall, involves AnonyGirl1 wearing a hood, holding a knife and criticising negative portrayals of adolescence). After having reached unprecedented (for her) levels of popularity as a result of “Give us a chance,” AnonyGirl1 offers that things have “been nuts on my channel.” “The morning after the night before” therefore comes as a response to her newfound fame. And she devotes much of it to recounting a few from among the multitude of comments her video prompts. Below is a sampling of the comments she receives, which she recites aloud:

- “Why does stuff like this get in the top views. I think my brain just pooped.”
- “Marry me please.”
- “Shut up.”
- “Sort it out love – you stupid wannabe gangster.”
- “Well said girl, you have courage to make this video.”
- “What’s the name of your disease girl?”
- “I want you to piss all over me.”
- “Shut up and get a boyfriend.”
- “Take the knife, take your hand, and slice your wrist, and please, stop making crappy videos.”
- “I watched you on mute and it was just as good.”
- “You’re retarded.”
- “You’re hot.”
- “People hate you because you’re black, not because you’re a teenager.”

Though AnonyGirl1's reactions to these responses are not always easy to read – she makes sarcastic quips in reply to most of the different comments she cites, and often seems delighted in doing so – she also appears damaged by them. The effect makes for what seems like a curious mix of expressions. On the one hand, she basks in the attention she is suddenly receiving, and happily boasts about the size of her newfound platform. And yet this belies what seems like a different set of emotions lurking beneath the surface, which she signals in what is often veiled commentary. This culminates when, toward the end of her video, she says, “It was really fun insulting you guys back. So as much as you’re thinking you’re getting to me, it’s not really working. Like a teeny, tiny bit, but you know, I can hide behind the safety of my computer too.” And, as if to reinforce that she is unaffected by some of the difficult comments she has received, she closes with, “I’m enjoying this experience, and I’m not leaving YouTube for no one,” an admission that only seems to highlight the opposite.

Her comments in a subsequent video confirm that other people's negative comments are indeed what brings her to the place of removing and then re-adding different combinations of her videos in ways previously described and, it might now be added, in ways that she seems to hope will present projections of herself less likely to provoke

antagonism from others (17 August, 2008). In this regard, her attempts at exercising control over her YouTube persona bring her to the place of narrative strategising alluded to earlier, the implications of which I now take up.

A narrative in disarray

When AnonyGirl1 chides her antagonists by calling attention to the ethics of their anonymity (“I can hide behind the safety of my computer too,” she says), she identifies a predominant communicative feature on YouTube, one that she eventually draws upon as an important resource. This communicative feature – evoked through notions of “hiding” and “safety” in AnonyGirl1’s quote, a quote which calls to mind how online commentators are often shielded from the consequences of their comments – finds form in what might be called a disembodied subjectivity, in the sense that the comments (both textual and video) of people who participate on YouTube (not to mention elsewhere online) are to varying degrees detached from the bodies who make them; and yet however tenuous are these links between body and speech, each works upon the other in ways that are consequential and affecting for the ‘subjects’ caught up in their circulations. AnonyGirl1, for one, is demonstrably affected by the incitements that these kinds of circulations produce – their vulgarities upset her. Yet she too finds a reprieve in effecting her own ‘disembodiments’ on YouTube. Doing so allows her to construct and to reconstruct, and thereby to negotiate her existence there. In the final section of this article, I explore how AnonyGirl1 negotiates YouTube’s flexible narrative structures and, in particular, what she teaches us about young people’s subject-making possibilities and practices on YouTube in the process of doing so.

When AnonyGirl1 reaches into her YouTube past and changes it – which happens when she takes the bold step of temporarily removing all of the videos that had for a long time comprised her YouTube profile, then later reposts twenty among them, before finally removing the latter and posting still new videos – this has the effect of profoundly changing the intact narrative she leaves behind; it alters who she is as she appears on YouTube. The iteration of AnonyGirl1 that I have thus far explored – the one which focuses on the roughly twenty videos she eventually reposts after deleting all of her past ones – is therefore but one of many possible iterations of her profile that I might have encountered had I retrieved it at different times. That said, what seems most interesting in investigating AnonyGirl1’s story entails not so much the act of mining the precise ways her story changes with each successive rearrangement of her YouTube profile – simply aiming to decipher these changes strikes me as a less penetrating practice than thinking about what it means that she *can* change her story. In this case, what seems most interesting in investigating Anonygirl1’s story entails asking what it means for her, and for others like her, that there exists a popular cultural space where this kind of public reordering of oneself is possible.

In one sense, AnonyGirl1 begins to answer this query by illustrating how she is able to complicate familiar narrative precepts in making herself on YouTube. In particular, the story of herself that she leaves on YouTube abandons presumptions of fixity in terms of its configurations. To the extent that narrative order is achieved through succession – in that bits and pieces of information must be linked as a condition of its intelligibility (Murray, 2003) – AnonyGirl1’s work redefines succession by remaking it into a flexible concept. What links two or more of her successive videos, this is to say what links the information that we must inscribe into the empty spaces between her videos in order for her story to hold together, is rendered unstable by her. When one of her videos gets removed, let alone re-added later on, viewers must forge new links

between what remains, new links that come with new consequences for how we might understand her.

This mode of making oneself puts a strain on “modern” narrative imperatives of adolescence, where demands placed on narrative experience often prize notions like unity, succession, completion, and arrival (Lesko, 2001). On the contrary, the story-making apparatuses available to online participants on YouTube and elsewhere allow them to somewhat disengage from these imperatives. When AnonyGirl1 adds and removes videos of herself, she demonstrates how time gets reorganised as an exceedingly flexible apparatus in her story of self; she destabilises configurations of events in time by showing that what once existed as sequential can be manoeuvred in various ways. In this sense, we might even say that time is de-spatialised within this context, which is to say that the information and events that we inscribe onto time in order to render its permutations intelligible to us – in this case, displayed in the form of making a series of videos about one’s life and giving them a sequence with the expectation that this sequence will tell viewers something important about the video maker – can on YouTube be endlessly recast in support of making oneself in temporary ways that one sees fit. The possibility of adding, re-adding, recombining and eliminating events in time, as AnonyGirl1 does, therefore causes time to lose its determinist assumptions. Time becomes unbound as something fluid under these conditions, and making oneself according to these fluidities opens up different possibilities for reshaping one’s imaginaries of self.

In the case of AnonyGirl1 in particular, the act of constructing herself in a space that makes available the possibility of changing the markings of her past – a circumstance which in turn allows her to continually recreate her present – creates a situation that seems especially interesting in terms of one of its implications (and in its subsequent complications). For what she does under these conditions is to bring to the exterior what might more commonly be thought of as a deeply interior process. Specifically, in reshaping her projections of herself by adding and removing the videos she makes, her public work of actively reconstructing her past through the varying gases of her present not only mirrors something salient about the internal machinations of these processes, but it gives these machinations meaning and expression within a social context. This seems especially significant when considering how it is that narratives find form within social worlds – namely, they are constructed through language, and organised in relation to social and cultural frames of reference, so that they can be grasped and negotiated by self and other alike (Murray, 2003, pp. 99-100; Hall, 1997). And yet in spite of this, attempts at giving narratives form through everyday speech are typically less flexible than in most acts of thinking or imagining. In this context, the significance of what AnonyGirl1 demonstrates is that on YouTube there seems a sort of opening within which the act of speech can resist some of the fixity that is usually endemic to it. When telling a story on YouTube, embedded in its telling is the opportunity to reconstruct what has been said about it after it has been told.

In previous sections I have covered how AnonyGirl1 plays with such permutations on YouTube, how they become an important resource for her in affording her the chance to express her changing conceptions of herself, and how she harnesses these resources in ways that both embrace inconsistencies and contest fixity in terms of the narrative of self she constructs. What needs to be added here is that for all that these conditions offer AnonyGirl1 by way of narrative resources, the possibilities they offer her also come with perilous consequences. In a context where endless refigurations of self are possible, what often ensues is a sense of confusion that at times seems to overwhelm her. Her confusion in turn raises a set of peripheral questions that, even if unarticulated by her, seem to hover over her various expressions of self: How do I make

myself in this space of expansive possibilities? According to what parameters can I, or should I, define who I am here? On what terms might I aim to redefine who I am here? And how, if at all, might I stake out a personal space within this shared cultural context of meaning-making?

For AnonyGirl1, what eventually emerges in this context is not a continuation of her work of making herself through her expressions of self on YouTube, but instead a now familiar moment where she completely unmakes herself as a presence there. In trying to make sense of this moment, consider again the quotation, now in extended form, from the video that I began this article by speaking about:

Hi, as some of you may know I've kind of announced that I'm leaving the AnonyGirl1 channel. And, I've kind of just randomly done it. I was just like God, I want to go I want to go, I want to go. I know you're probably thinking, 'where did this come from.'... I've been thinking about it for a while.... I feel like the channel is based on someone I'm not anymore. I'm not the same person that you guys all, I don't know, enjoy to watch. And I get comments everyday saying, 'your old videos are better. You used to be so much more fun and you used to be so much cooler. Blah blah blah.' And that kind of takes a really big toll on you when the person you're being in your videos is yourself. And for someone to come along and say 'oh, you used to be so much cooler, you used to be a lot better back in the day....'... For someone to completely be digging at who you are... it got to me. I shouldn't have let it... I don't know.... I'm just kind of, I'm overwhelmed. (17 August, 2008)

In this same video, she also expresses a desire to restart her YouTube experience anew ("I need to start fresh" and to "start again" she alternately repeats). Likewise, she fantasises aloud about the possibility of having "a new channel" with "no subscribers," citing as a reason that, "I just – it's time to take a break again, sorry, but this time a real break and come back as the real me..." And towards the end of the video she offers: "Umm, I need your opinion on what to do with these old videos. I want to just get rid of them. Maybe, I don't know, unless there are ones that you want back..."

Of course we now know that AnonyGirl1 removes her videos from YouTube after this moment, before returning twenty of them a short while later, but what she signals in negotiating this departure is interesting. In the midst of announcing her own removal from YouTube, when she comes to the point of mentioning whether to repost several of the videos she has removed ("Umm, I need your opinion"), it seems clear that she is unable to leave behind the seductions that YouTube offers her in terms of affording her the chance to mend what she deems to be forever reparative in such a space (namely, her projections of herself, as well as the responses that she receives as a consequence of airing these projections). We see this most perceptibly in the fact that in spite of being "overwhelmed" and needing to "start fresh," she still courts input from anonymous others in pursuit of these reparations.

Giddens' (1991) notion of a reflexive self, a conception of selfhood that posits that our current historical moment is characterised by endless decision making apparatuses that prompt us toward negotiating constant questions about who we are and who we might be, seems prescient in this context. What AnonyGirl1 seems to have to constantly negotiate on YouTube is a surfeit of possibilities about how she might construct herself. And the preceding quotation makes clear that she amends to these possibilities a sort of self-imposed discipline, one that is clearly informed by the impressions of others, and that both produces and constrains her behaviour. Her expressions of self on YouTube

are therefore not simply amorphous incantations of a disembodied self that she constructs there.

This in turn raises the question of what it is that really precipitates the emotions she expresses in the preceding extended quotation, what it is that specifically becomes “overwhelming” to her with regard to her presence on YouTube. Is she overwhelmed by the difficult commentary she at times receives from others about her videos, or is her angst also a consequence of the dissing narrative choices that YouTube provokes for her? The answer at least partly seems to be that while AnonyGirl1 aims to manage her narrative and is seduced into thinking that she can, YouTube’s expansive possibilities for doing so leaves her struggling to grasp for meaning amidst its surfeit of choices.

In this sense, what this finally alerts us to is perhaps a fitting irony considering all of the ambiguities that AnonyGirl1’s case presents – in context of the endless narrative choices AnonyGirl1 has at her disposal on YouTube, and in context of the pleasures and disappointments she evidently experiences in engaging in these choices, what she paradoxically seems to chase amidst these conditions is some sense of fixity. Put differently, for all the narrative fluidities that her story exemplifies, there is a sense in which she yearns for stability and permanence as a reprieve from these fluidities. We see this in the preceding quotation when she idealises an earlier time on YouTube (she dreams of “a new channel” with “no subscribers”), which her comments seem to signal represent for her a less complicated set of conditions, and thus a position from which she might begin to fix into view a new conception of self (and specifically a new “real” self). By the same token, we see evidence of the same in her repeated desire to exercise control over the fleeting self that she does project (“it’s time to take a break and come back as the real me”). The irony in question comes therefore in her endeavouring to use YouTube, this space from which she so pointedly explores narrative fluidities, as a means of retreating to fixity.

In the end, what AnonyGirl1’s story perhaps most incisively points us toward is the necessity of thinking about how it is that these opposing notions (fluidity and fixity) might exist together in her conception of herself as expressed on YouTube. In this sense, even if at times constructing herself by clinging to notions of fixity (“it’s time to come back as the real me”), the broader scope of her contribution more often reveals her delight in negotiating the new possibilities of making and unmaking herself that her online participation affords her (“I’m so excited to start fresh”). And this perhaps contains the essence of a more expansive lesson that AnonyGirl1 shares in her exposition. Namely, that making oneself on YouTube and on online spaces like it is premised on a promise that is at once full of choices and possibilities for actualising fluid and flexible narrative expressions of self, but that thorny issues can lurk in the shadows of these possibilities. AnonyGirl1 explores issues and concerns in relation to both of these premises on YouTube. In the process of doing so, she confronts the presumed coherences of youth narratives, defies narrative notions of temporal linearity, and offers us new ways of imagining the construction of one’s self. In this regard what AnonyGirl1’s leaves us with in her telling of her story of herself, is a different kind of articulation of adolescence than we might have had she expressed herself elsewhere, and thus otherwise. This articulation gives expression to how narrative forms premised on temporal linearity, which modern narratives of adolescence often exemplify (i.e. ages and stages), might co-exist with and perhaps even suppress what is really a more complicated process of subject making – one that resists the fictions of linearity in favour of the recursive processes of articulation and re-articulation that are increasingly reflective of many young people’s experiences of self and meaning-making.

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Appendix: List of AnonyGirl1 YouTube Referencesⁱⁱⁱ

- *How i cheer myself up*, 20 April 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFnkMnsqWY>
- *OMG meat free meat!?!?!!*, 12 May 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfCx7pMtPgs>
- *KevJumba this ones for you!*, 30 May 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSDjgPuksjw>
- *Pie in a can*, 6 June 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uV7Vc6hONrs>
- *My dog is like so fat*, 7 June 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV8SOkotPFY>
- *HaPpY LeSsOnS part 1 of many to come*, 10 June 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42456rBS7iA>
- *Good Hair Moment*, 12 June 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-8kWRsaibo>
- *Harry Potter Audition and The Pippi's Attitude Problem*, 26 June 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5GsBnVFqRo
- *Lost in Translation*, 7 July 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MdSvQ_bAY0
- *500,000+ views!!!*. 28 August 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMM-6syXrGQ>
- *Give us a chance*, 17 October 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orE1SjUCFNc>
- *the morning after the night before*, 19 October 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQnL-iJmWSc>
- *THE SHOWTUNE GAME!!! OMG GUESS THAT TUNE!!!* 1 November 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSS1kp6Ly-M>
- *Why is it so hard to accept that maybe were just normal?* 5 November 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PTSIMQ35M>
- *NSG and AnonyGirl1 are at it again!! Acoustic Broken*. 27 January 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ep2dTjflRyQ>
- *VALENTINES DAY SUCKS!!!* 11 February 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TExsWuM9Mnc>
- *1 Year of AnonyGirl1*. 18 February 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMx_q5bnVKQ

- *What is an Adult?* 12 May 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcjOO-b2Wmw>
- *CENSOR YOUTUBE!!!!!!*, *i was asked some questions*, READ, 31 July 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhjCMPFK7OMJ>
- *an explanation of what im up to with the channel* READ DESCRIPTION!!!, 17 August 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om3hq2UE6TA>
- *Its an Anonygirl1 Update!!! In sexy laptop cam quality!!* 19 September 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8k-tRw50as>

Biographical Statement

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ⁱ Her reposting of these twenty videos also proved temporary, as she in time removed these videos as well, only to replace them with (and then remove) still other videos.

ⁱⁱ I retrieved the video on September 9, 2008. At that time, videos deemed “featured” were ones that YouTube site operators chose to showcase through prominent display on their website, display that often went a long way toward determining what videos among YouTube’s millions would actually be seen by broad audiences.

ⁱⁱⁱ To note, in concert with *AnonyGirl1*’s practice of adding and deleting videos of herself on YouTube, the effects of which much of this paper explores, the videos listed in the Appendix are no longer posted on YouTube at the time of my writing this.