

IMPROPER NAMES

COLLECTIVE PSEUDONYMS FROM
THE LUDDITES TO ANONYMOUS

MARCO DESERIIS



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INTRODUCTION

GENEALOGY AND THEORY OF THE IMPROPER NAME

In May–June 1995, a local community radio station in Rome aired a curious live broadcast experiment. Every Saturday night, for five consecutive weeks, all participants in the program vowed to go by the same name and be the same person. By introducing themselves as Luther Blissett, anchors, correspondents and listeners embraced the confusion that ensued: “Hold on, we have a Luther calling in from the Colosseum. Hi, Luther, how *am I* doing tonight?” asked the anchorwoman. “Pretty good, and *myself*?” responded a male listener. “Not bad, not bad,” replied the anchor. “Listen, a group of Luthers are converging on the Colosseum right now to organize a three-sided football match. Do you wanna help them out?”

As I was listening to the stream of gendered voices that greeted each other always in the first person, I realized that the radio show was a powerful expression of what we called the “condividual” (*condividuo*). In the spring of that year, I had attended a few preparatory meetings of *Radio Blissett* at a friend’s apartment. Back then, I had not realized that the number of individuals involved in the Luther Blissett Project (LBP) went well beyond the core circle of organizers I had met at these meetings. Thus I was caught by surprise when several dozen people—all of whom seemed perfectly comfortable with their new identity—materialized for *Radio Blissett*. Once on the air, the *condividual* came to life as a strange polyphonous being, a ventriloquist that could not help but speak in multiple tongues. As the only guest, listener, and anchor of the show, Blissett could merely entertain a conversation with itself, as it were.¹ At the same time, the distinctive timbre of each voice made clear that each Luther was a “dividual” that contributed to the *condividual* in his or her own distinctive way.² Blissett’s voices and multiple bodies engaged in surreal but coordinated activities such as itinerant rave parties, urban drifts, three-sided football matches, and “psychic attacks” against government buildings such as the Birth Records Office, the Italian Society of Authors and Publishers, and

the Provincial Office of Labor. According to Luther Blissett, these agencies were responsible of enforcing outdated notions of identity, intellectual property, and labor, respectively. As such, they deserved the wrath of the condividual.

Luther Blissett was a “multiple-use name.” That is, anyone could become Luther Blissett simply by adopting the name. Launched in Bologna in 1994, the open reputation quickly spread to other Italian cities, and thanks to the Internet, it did not take long to go international. By the late 1990s, the multiple-use name had been borrowed by hundreds of individuals around the world to author media pranks, sell apocryphal manuscripts to publishers, fabricate artists and artworks, denounce media witch hunts, author best-selling novels, and conduct psychogeographic experiments, or simply as an Internet handle. Even though the wild circulation of the pseudonym made it difficult to define its exact role and function, in the intention of its creators, Blissett was meant to be a folk hero of the information age that could narrate a vast community of cultural producers into existence. In particular, the founders of the Luther Blissett Project saw the condividual as a modern Robin Hood who could seize the symbolic and material wealth accumulated by the culture industries and redistribute it to its increasingly underpaid and precarious producers.

To provide the multiple-use name with historical depth, the LBP founders inserted Blissett into a lineage of legendary and fictional progenitors. These included Monty Cantsin and Karen Eliot, two aliases that had been shared by North American and European mail artists in the 1980s to undermine the art world’s need for originality and novelty; Ned Ludd, the eponymous leader invented by the English Luddites to resist the introduction of labor-saving machines during the Industrial Revolution; and Spartacus, a collective name adopted by the revolting Roman slaves in the homonymous film by Stanley Kubrick. Such genealogy can be extended, as I will do in this book, by adding case studies such as Allen Smithee, a collective pseudonym shared by Hollywood film directors to work outside of their reputation, and Anonymous, a tag shared by thousands of Internet activists to reclaim freedom of speech and unrestrained access to information technology.

Even though these pseudonymous personae are suspended between reality and fiction and operate in different historic settings, the twofold

purpose of this book is to demonstrate (1) that despite their historical contingency, they share some common features, and (2) that the relations of similarity entailed by those common features do not prevail over relations of difference. In this sense, the orientation of this study is both analytical and genealogical. On an analytical level, *Improper Names* argues that sharing a pseudonym is a distinctive authorial strategy that performs specific aesthetic, political, and technical functions. On a genealogical level, this study tries to demonstrate, after Michel Foucault, that improper names are practices that “[allow] us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics.”³ Although academic research may tend to ignore or disqualify such knowledge as “naive,” “nonconceptual,” and “insufficiently elaborated,” this genealogy shows that however discontinuous they may be, these “knowleges from below” are able to address their own critical questions.⁴

Whether they have been handed down through oral accounts or encoded in different media, these pseudonyms have in fact circulated in the public domain and affected the social imagination for a long time. Furthermore, these aliases function as *processes of mediation* with a double function. On one hand, a shared pseudonym allows its users to recognize each other for the simple fact of sharing a name. On the other hand, the alias brings within the same discursive space actions and utterances that are produced by heterogeneous forms of association and organization—some of which are collectivized and institutionalized and some of which are more spontaneous and less structured.

Drawing from these preliminary observations, I propose to define an improper name as the adoption of the same alias by organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors. An improper name is improper not only because it lacks manners or propriety of behavior—in that case, it would only be inappropriate—but because it fails to label and circumscribe a clearly defined domain (what Michel De Certeau calls “a proper”).⁵ Contrary to a proper name, whose chief function is to *fix* a referent as part of the operation of a system of signs, an improper name is explicitly constructed to obfuscate both the identity and number of its referents. On one hand, the improper name embeds the shielding effect of any pseudonym, that is, the pseudonym’s nominal function of protecting an individual by substituting her legal name qua marker of her identity. On

the other hand, an improper name functions as an open multiplicity that can hardly be disambiguated and assigned a discrete referent.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE IMPROPER NAME

To further explore the ambivalent nature of this obfuscation, I shall briefly unearth the etymological meaning of the term *condividual*. A derivative of the Italian *condivisione* (sharing as “dividing together”), the *condividual* does not necessarily presuppose a community but only a concatenation of parts. In fact, the users of a shared pseudonym may not be bound by anything but their temporary homonymy. Yet my wager is that improper names stretch across a continuum that goes from highly centralized and planned usages (collective pseudonyms) to decentralized and idiosyncratic appropriations (multiple-use names).

To situate an improper name in this continuum, it is necessary to analyze its *authorizing context*, which determines how a pseudonym is to be used and by whom. Authorizing contexts include social movements, unions, art and political collectives, and Internet-based communities. Although such contexts may initially succeed in controlling the range of possible usages, as soon as the alias is released in the public domain, it can be easily appropriated for unforeseen purposes. In other words, *collective pseudonyms* and *multiple-use names* denote two attributes of the improper name in terms of varying degrees of control.

Although improper names have been created in the most disparate social, political, and cultural milieux, I maintain that they share three common features and functions:

1. empowering a subaltern social group by providing a *medium* for identification and mutual recognition to their users
2. enabling those who do not have a voice of their own to acquire a *symbolic power* outside the boundaries of an institutional practice
3. expressing a *process of subjectivation* characterized by the proliferation of difference

This means that improper names function as assemblages of enunciation that are common and singular, impersonal yet individuated. Although

these aliases retain the formal features of a proper name, their multiple and unpredictable iterations in the public sphere put into crisis the referential function of the proper name.

I will deepen the relationship between the improper name and the proper name later in this introductory chapter. For now, I shall just notice that improper names emerge from a crisis in established forms of political and aesthetic representation. The five case studies analyzed in this book—Ned Ludd, Monty Cantsin (and Karen Eliot), Allen Smithee, Luther Blissett, and Anonymous—are all situated at critical historic junctures, such as the emergence of modern industrial capitalism, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, and the emergence of the information society. If these socioeconomic upheavals upset established forms of political and aesthetic representation, improper names express this instability by denoting assemblages of enunciation that are visible yet obfuscated, nameable but difficult to identify.

THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF SINGULARITIES

Improper names are never entirely secret or centralized, but they always imply a certain degree of publicity, dissemination, and loss of control. It is through circulation in the public sphere that the use of an alias becomes a process of subjectivation whereby those who do not have a voice of their own seek to acquire a symbolic power outside the boundaries of an institutional practice.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has defined symbolic power as the magic power to act on the social world through words. Drawing from J. L. Austin's reflections on the conditions of felicity of an utterance, Bourdieu argues that "the real source of the magic of performative utterances lies in the mystery of ministry, i.e. in the delegation by virtue of which an individual—king, priest or spokesperson—is mandated to speak and act on behalf of the group, thus constituted in him and by him."⁶ Collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names are forms of symbolic power in their own right. But rather than being exercised through an institution, the symbolic power of an improper name is directly managed by the community of its users. This does not mean that such power is equally distributed among the users. For instance, the creator(s) of an

improper name may try to retain some exclusive rights over the pseudonym. But such an attempt would not go unchallenged, as improper names often conceal divergences in opinion over their finality and function. An analysis of these divergences is essential to grasping the improper not as a process of simplification and *reductio ad unum* but, on the contrary, as a singular process of subjectivation characterized by the proliferation of difference.

The concept of singularity stems from a long tradition of political ontology that dates back to European theologians such as Duns Scotus and Nicholas of Cusa and continues in modern times with the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Gilbert Simondon, Gilles Deleuze, and, more recently, Jean-Luc Nancy, Rosi Braidotti, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri, among others. Here I shall limit myself to following Hardt and Negri's elegant observation that the notion of singularity differs from that of identity in that it is linked to multiplicity in three respects. First, singularity is defined "by a multiplicity outside of itself"; second, "singularity points to a multiplicity within itself"; and third, it "is always engaged in a process of becoming different—a temporal multiplicity."⁷

This threefold nexus between singularity and multiplicity is a distinctive feature of the improper name. Improper names do not engage dialectically with an outside, that is, they do not tend to divide the social space into two symmetrical, opposed fields. On the contrary, by making themselves available to unforeseen appropriations, they let the outside slip into the inside, and vice versa. This means that improper names do not designate fixed identities. Rather, they are heterogeneous assemblages in which the whole (the ensemble of an improper name's iterations) is unable to unify and totalize the parts, among which, nevertheless, it establishes relationships and paths of communication.⁸

In temporal terms, an improper name may take unforeseen turns as it is appropriated by different individuals. For instance, in its circulation across different regions of England, the name Ned Ludd came to be associated with a variety of demands that were not only related to resistance against industrial machinery. Allen Smithee, the pseudonym coined by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) for Hollywood film directors who want to disown a film, has also been adopted by screenwriters, actors,

and film producers outside of the DGA's oversight. And multiple-use names such as Monty Cantsin, Karen Eliot, Luther Blissett, and Anonymous are all "open reputations" that purposefully lend themselves to multiple uses.

This means that behind an improper mode of subjectivation there exists an assemblage of bodies that cannot easily be integrated into members of a class. Thus the eminently political process whereby a multiplicity constitutes a collective subject of enunciation ("We, the People . . .") is displaced here by a heterogeneous composition that disturbs the smooth articulation of the many into the one. In this sense, the notion of the improper suggests that between the formation of the Western modern individual and forms of collectivism organized under the banner of the Party, the Union, the Corporation, and the Church, there exists a third, minor strand of subjectivity that does not conform to either side of this polarity but recombines the I and the We in a highly unstable, elusive assemblage. Such elusiveness points to the unrepresentable character of a multitude, a subject that escapes political unity and refuses to transfer authority to a sovereign. Theorized by Spinoza in the seventeenth century, and expunged by Hobbes and Rousseau from the horizon of modernity in favor of the People, the multitude is today regaining center stage at every level of social and political life. Unabashedly plural and multitudinous are the forms of cooperation, linguistic games, and affective flows that inform the life on the screen in a turbulent media environment such as Web 2.0. And so are the new forms of activism experimented by the embodied social movements that have been inundating the streets and squares of the Middle East, southern Europe, and North and South America since February 2011.

Yet contemporary theorizations of the multitude rarely address the concrete processes of subjectivation whereby these multitudes express themselves in the public sphere of communication. This work tries to fill this gap by delving into the complex dynamics and negotiations modern and contemporary multitudes undertake as they build up their own symbolic power while keeping its exercise open to the becoming of the social. It also suggests, especially in the chapter on Anonymous, that this becoming increasingly includes nonhuman actors, which follow a *techno*-logic of their own.

A GENEALOGY OF IMPROPER NAMES IN MODERN TIMES

As noted, the first distinctive feature of improper names is to provide anonymity and a medium for mutual recognition to their users. By failing to designate an identifiable referent, improper names make it difficult for authorities to track down specific individuals while enabling participation in social and political activities on an informal basis. It is no accident that many improper names emerge in rural societies where forms of organized resistance are unconstituted and illegal. For instance, the historian John Maddicott has suggested that the legend of Robin Hood may originate from the attribution of the same alias to notorious English thieves in the early fourteenth century.⁹ And the French peasants who rose in arms against the nobility and clergy of the Beauvais in the Great Jacquerie of 1358 derive their name from their leader Guillaume Caillet, popularly known as Jacques Bonhomme. In other circumstances, peasants and farmers were not named after an eponymous leader but deliberately chose to share a personal name to conspire against the authorities. Such is the case of Poor Konrad, the collective pseudonym adopted by the Swabian peasants of southern Germany during their rebellion against taxes in 1514; Captain Swing, a pseudonym employed by impoverished English farmworkers in the riots that swept the southeast of England and led to the destruction of thousands of mechanized threshing machines in 1830; and Rebecca, the name shared by the tenant farmers of southwest Wales to attack toll gates between 1839 and 1843 as a form of resistance against rents, tithes, and the enclosure of common lands.¹⁰

The Rebecca and Swing riots were preceded (and presumably inspired) by the Luddite riots of 1811–17, with which improper names make their appearance in England, the first modern industrialized society. By relying on the recent publication of the *Writings of the Luddites*—a transcription of dozens of letters, ballads, and declarations written by the Luddites themselves—in chapter 1, I trace the initial baptism and usage of the eponym Ned Ludd as it migrated from Nottinghamshire (home to Robin Hood) to Yorkshire and the booming cotton districts around Manchester.¹¹ In this migration, Luddite discourse shifts from an initial narrow focus on the new, “obnoxious” labor-saving machines to a wider set of economic and political issues—including high food prices, low

wages, rising unemployment, ineffective labor acts and regulations, and the legitimacy of monarchic power. Thus, on one hand, Ned Ludd became a medium and a catalyst for a disparate, if contradictory, set of demands. On the other hand, as we shall see, the Industrial Revolution had created a veritable rift between the workers of the traditional wool trades in central England and the new factory workers of the cotton industry in the Northwest.

If the Luddites shared the same pseudonym as part of a mythmaking strategy that amplified the symbolic power and the material effects of machine breaking, the name Ned Ludd did not have per se an economic value. The rise of the first modern culture industry—the nineteenth-century Victorian publishing industry—changes this state of affairs as a whole new political economy of the signature takes shape. By understanding that the curiosity of a fast-growing readership in the identity and lives of literary authors lent itself to commercial exploitation, late-Victorian publishers such as C. H. Clarke and T. F. Unwin built successful editorial operations through novel series such as *The Pseudonym Library* and the so-called *Anonyma* series.¹² In this way, young publishers who did not own large capital were able to sign relatively unknown and therefore less expensive authors. At the same time, they brought together under the same imprint writers and literary genres that would have otherwise had little in common.

The idea that an alias can function as the lynchpin of works authored by multiple individuals resurfaces in France with Nicolas Bourbaki, a pseudonym shared by a collective of French mathematicians for more than six decades. Founded in 1934, and including extraordinary figures such as André Weil, Jean-Pierre Serre, Laurent Schwarz, and Alexander Grothendieck, the Bourbaki group consistently used the pseudonym to organize a series of seminars and author all its writings—including *Éléments de mathématique*, a monumental ten-volume treatise that systematized the principles of modern advanced mathematics. By overriding individual contributions and perspectives, the signature “N. Bourbaki” was meant to express the group’s firm belief that mathematics is a unitary field held together by the axiomatic method and the invariability of mathematical structures. Such a belief was reflected in the group’s consensus-based method of collaboration, which was ultimately aimed at reaching unanimous decisions and eliminating contradiction. Furthermore, the set of rules

that determined membership in the Bourbaki collective (the cofounders had to retire at the age of fifty, and new members had to prove themselves in recruiting seminars) allowed new generations of mathematicians to keep the collective signature alive, in an ideal line of continuity with the founding fathers, until the late 1990s.¹³

But if the Bourbaki signature was *always* appended to the works produced by a collective, then these works may well have been signed by a collective author such as the Bourbaki Group. In other words, because it was a direct expression of the collective's unanimous decisions, the signature functioned as a proper name that designated a delineated subject of enunciation. This means that the creation of a collective pseudonym is not sufficient in and of itself to bring about an improper name. Rather, as previously noted, it is the lack of a proper domain or stable referent—that is, the instability of the relationship between signifier and signified—that puts in crisis the proper name's putative function to designate a referent in all its possible universes.

The structuralist approach of the Bourbaki group was highly influential in the 1950s and 1960s not only for mathematics but also for the social sciences. In 1949, Weil had provided an elegant algebraic solution to Claude Lévi-Strauss's classic analysis of the marriage laws and kinship structures among the Australian Murngin aborigines.¹⁴ Beginning in the 1970s, however, the group's belief that mathematics was a unitary field proved to be increasingly untenable. Yet the crisis of structuralism did not affect the group's survival, and potential internal conflicts did not result in the circulation of competing Bourbaki texts. In this respect, it is useful to contrast the case of Bourbaki with that of Allen Smithee (or Alan Smithee), a pseudonym introduced in 1969 by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) to allow film directors to disown movies that are recut by a production company. Like Bourbaki, Smithee was initially controlled by the DGA, which required a director to undergo a strict procedure to prove that a movie had been recut without the director's consent. Unlike Bourbaki, however, the DGA monopoly over Smithee came under increasing scrutiny, and eventually the union decided to disown its own brainchild.

Chapter 2 shows how the Smithee signature was originally introduced at a time of crisis in the studio system that was marked by dwindling box-office revenues and the dismantling of the Motion Picture Production

Code—the bureaucratic and financial apparatus that had guaranteed the consolidation of the studios' oligopoly since the 1930s. From this point of view, Smithee is not a mere placeholder for a missing film director but an expression of the directors' collective ability to extend their creative control over the entire filmmaking process. Indeed, in the 1970s, directors gained a wider creative autonomy, and entire filmographies were reorganized around directors' unique visions and styles—a perspective that was pioneered by U.S. critic Andrew Sarris.¹⁵

By taking this perspective all too seriously, a group of scholars came together at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1990s with the intent of studying Smithee's "oeuvre." The Allen Smithee Group drew on Derrida's theory of the signature to suggest that Smithee is an artificial author that, by linking works that have nothing in common other than their signature, denaturalizes established models of authorship figured along the masculine metaphor of the director as a film's sole and rightful father.¹⁶ Thus, as soon as we stop considering Smithee as a simple stand-in for a missing film director and take it seriously, on a cultural level, we discover what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would call a "minor" author—an author whose oeuvre is intrinsically collective, does not have a recognizable style, and hence does not have a place of its own in the history of cinema.¹⁷ On the level of political economy, a Smithee credit has the effect of laying bare the studio system as a money-making machine that enables the category of the director-as-auteur only to lend a face to its standardized production. As a stock of *negative cultural capital*, however, Smithee's filmography cannot be easily converted into exchange value. This means that Smithee is the improper name of what, paraphrasing Foucault, I call the *disowning-function*—a function that, by decoupling authorship into a cultural layer and an economic layer, reverses the conflation of property and propriety, ownership and reputation, set in motion by the modern culture industry.¹⁸

MULTIPLE-USE NAMES AND POST-FORDISM

While Smithee was introduced in an industry that was originally modeled after a Ford factory, the late 1960s mark the end of the Fordist Hollywood and the beginning of a new phase characterized by a more flexible system

of production—what we might call a post-Fordist Hollywood. Within this system, the name of the director came to be associated with a distinctive *vision* through which movies could be profitably marketed. In this respect, the DGA's request to protect a director's reputation can be seen as a means for protecting a brand name that had a growing economic value for the entire film industry. This also meant that directors had to develop, as we shall see, a procedure to discriminate between legitimate requests to disown a film and illegitimate ones. In other words, as directors acquired growing stakes within the industry, they learned how to police themselves—a shift that seems to characterize the post-Fordist subjectivity in general, if it is true that, under post-Fordism, a worker invests her entire “soul” into the product of her labor, as Franco Berardi puts it.¹⁹

And yet the notion that a personal reputation needs to be monitored and protected can also be reversed so as to imagine what might happen if the name of a cultural producer is circulated for everyone to use. A group of mail artists in Portland, Oregon, decided to test this hypothesis when they invented the “Open Pop Star” and multiple-use name Monty Cantsin in 1977. Among the case studies analyzed in this book, Cantsin is perhaps the most unruly of all, as it was released in the public domain with virtually no instructions for use. Besides reflecting the idiosyncratic personality of many of its users, Cantsin is a figure of the distributed creativity of the Mail Art network.

In chapter 3, I trace the origins of this assemblage to early artistic experiments with the postal system in the 1960s. In particular, I show how Ray Johnson's idea of asking his addressees to “add to and return” or forward his mailings to third parties set in motion a network of correspondences that transformed the mail from a medium for interpersonal communication into a social space. The emergence of a distinctive *aesthetics of networking*—an aesthetics that shifts the emphasis from the production of objects to the manifold relations among networkers—has two major consequences for the art world. First, it restores the idea that the production and distribution of art can follow the logic—or, as Derrida puts it, the “madness”—of the gift rather than that of exchange value.²⁰ Second, by affirming an ethics of radical inclusiveness, it creates an autonomous sphere for the production and distribution of art that challenges traditional curatorial practices. In fact, mail artists redefined curating from a set of selective criteria aimed at separating Art from art to a collaborative effort,

undertaken by the artists themselves, that brought together the manifold exchanges that made the network.²¹

This movement from Art to art is thus a movement toward the continuum of everyday life. It is no accident that by the end of the 1970s, the inclusivity of mail art meets the participatory ethics of punk in an ongoing exchange of letters, zines, tapes, and artworks through the postal system. Monty Cantsin is both an offspring and a figure of the distributed creativity of these networks. The multiple-use name embodies the possibility for *everyone* to participate in an open pop star whose fame is supposed to grow through multiple and possibly contradictory enactments. Yet, as we shall see, the fact that the name was released with no guidelines subjected it to individual appropriations and overidentifications that ultimately damaged its ability to function as a name of the common. This became clear when the improper name migrated to Canada and Europe to function as the spokesperson of Neoism—a fictitious art movement that performed the resurgence of the modern avant-garde while constantly undermining it with farcical poses and nonsensical statements.

In the final part of the chapter, I show how the emphasis on the paradoxical and contradictory character of Neoism had the unintended effect of overshadowing the power relationships that existed within the network. At the same time, Neoists such as Stewart Home and Vittore Baroni understood that the multiple-use name strategy could be improved by designing practical guidelines to protect it from personal overidentification. These included the suggestion of not using the multiple-use name in conjunction with one's patronymic and of clouding its initial baptism so that no particular individual could personally identify with it. Baroni and Home's suggestions found fertile ground in Bologna, Italy, in summer 1994, when a group of young activists decided to launch the Luther Blissett Project (LBP). Although the activists borrowed the name from a real person—namely, a British soccer player of Jamaican origins who had played an unfortunate season in the Italian Serie A a decade earlier—no one knows why the name was chosen and exactly by whom. By shrouding the origins of the project in mystery, the activists designed an elaborate mythmaking strategy aimed at turning Blissett into a figure of immaterial labor.

Chapter 4 shows how the success of this strategy was due to the interplay of at least four intertwined factors. First, because most Blissett

practitioners considered themselves activists rather than artists, they had little interest in attaching their individual names to the condividual. Second, most of Blissett's interventions were coordinated through the Internet by groups operating in different cities. Thus, on an organizational level, the LBP functioned as a network whose nodes were collectively managed. Third, the LBP's innovative use of networked media was coupled with a reinvention of historic avant-garde practices such as the "psychogeographic drift"—an experiential mapping of the modern city that had been first practiced and theorized by the Lettrists and the Situationists in the 1950s and 1960s. This creative deterritorialization of the language of the avant-garde—and this is the fourth element of the LBP's strategy—was also coupled with a novel approach to the media. Whereas the Neoists' idea of launching an open pop star was hampered by the Neoists' countercultural approach—with the result that Cantsin never became famous—the LBP chose to utilize a less cryptic language and directly targeted the media. In particular, the activists devised a series of elaborate media pranks whereby they could tell their own stories both *through* the media and *against* them. These included the fabrication of satanic cults, the creation of fake artists, and the publication of a political pamphlet, which snowballed into a national *affaire* involving print publishers, server administrators, priests, magistrates, and politicians.

Finally, I elaborate a critique of mythmaking by arguing that although the authors of this strategy—in particular, the Bolognese branch of the LBP—emphasized that Luther Blissett was an open and participatory assemblage of enunciation, unspoken hierarchies made some narrative strands more powerful than others. This is evident not only from the interviews I collected with members of the Viterbo LBP but also from the cofounders' choice of announcing the seppuku (ritual suicide) of the condividual in 1999. Besides allowing the Bolognese group to move to new projects (such as the collective of novelists Wu Ming and the net art group 0100101110101101.ORG), the impromptu announcement of Blissett's suicide caught several LBP participants by surprise. By liquidating their brainchild, the cofounders of the LBP eventually reclaimed an authorship over the folk hero—an authorship they had initially rejected by clouding its origins in mystery.

IMPROPER NAMES IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Because multiple-use names are open by definition to multiple usages, they harbor potential conflicts between the early adopters of the name and the latecomers. Whereas a collective pseudonym implies the existence of a community that defines, at least initially, its purpose and function, a multiple-use name can be appropriated by communities and individuals who do not necessarily share the same ethos and objectives. As we have seen, communities and networks, collectives and affinity groups, are the authorizing contexts of an improper name. Depending on their composition, culture, and position in a wider field of forces, such contexts can adopt different norms on how an alias is to be used. The more these rules are rigidly enforced, the less the name tends to be improper—that is, the less it undergoes a transformation during the course of its life.

We have already seen that although Nicolas Bourbaki was formally a shared pseudonym, its consistent use did not make it behave differently from a proper name. Let us also briefly consider the case of Jane, an alias that was adopted by a group of feminist activists from Chicago, Illinois, to run an illegal abortion service used by thousands of women in the years leading up to the Supreme Court's landmark decision to legalize abortion in 1973.²² If the women used "Jane" to answer the phone and make contact with other women in need of medical assistance, the illegal nature of the operation made it difficult to use the alias for speaking out in public. Thus the name functioned more as a password that disclosed access to an underground world than to set in motion a process of subjectivation characterized by the proliferation of difference. Yet if Jane would have circulated and been appropriated by other women across the country, it would have probably become an improper name.

Thus the obfuscating function of collective pseudonyms is not in contrast with the possibility that these may acquire a symbolic power and a public dimension. What enables such transformation is the encoding of the alias in a variety of media and cultural forms, such as oral and written accounts, songs, essays, novels, letters, zines, artworks, graffiti, films, e-mails, online forums, and websites. By detaching the alias from its original authorizing context and the intentions of its creators, those media allow for its dissemination across vast swaths of time and space.

The rise of the network society accelerates this process of deterritorialization. As signifiers are unhinged from their referents at an increasingly fast pace, we assist the emergence of phenomena that are improper and condividual in character. For example, the impropriety of Internet memes—such as catchphrases, image macros, viral videos, and Web celebrities—lies in the fact that those signifiers maintain recognizable features while their associated meanings are subject to continuous variation. Memes are also condividual in that they are situated at the intersection of the collective imagination and dividual iterations that are authorless yet discrete and punctual. Furthermore, as an expression of the imaginal productivity of pseudonymous and anonymous Internet forums, Internet memes can be seen as a cultural inversion of the Web 2.0 reputation economy—with its obsession with individual identity and the measurement of social preference, status, and influence.

One of the earliest and most powerful Internet meme machines is the imageboard 4chan—a forum in which users communicate by exchanging images and short texts. Launched in 2003, 4chan allows users to post anonymously and does not archive its message threads, which are erased as soon as the server capacity is reached. This feature of the software prompts users to select and reply to certain message threads to stretch their life-span. 4chan's production of memes is thus a function of a specific relationship between the attention time shared by users on a single thread and the competition among multiple threads to capture and retain that attention. Because a discussion thread is usually made of several contributions, taken as a whole, it constitutes an assemblage of enunciation in its own right.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to Anonymous, a network of hackers and activists that derives its name from the tag that marks all unsigned posts in 4chan. Initially, the problematic of Anonymous lies at the intersection of an impersonal, potentially deindividuating technology, such as the imageboard, and human subjectivity and will. Throughout the chapter, I broaden this initial claim to suggest that Anonymous expresses the convergence of a technological drive toward indetermination with the human belief that open technologies are conducive to a freer society. Anonymous emerges from the mutual constitution of these poles in an assemblage that is both indifferent to the meaning and consequence of its

actions and ethically committed to them. I base this paradoxical claim on Gilbert Simondon's notion of transduction as an operation that progressively structures a domain that is filled with potentials and in a state of "metastable equilibrium."²³

My wager is that Anonymous is itself a metastable system that undergoes multiple individuations. In particular, I show how Anonymous has undergone at least three transition phases since its inception around 2005. The first phase coincides with the transition from Anonymous as a default function of the imageboard to Anonymous as a collective assemblage of enunciation. Such individuation emerged from the confrontation of those who insisted on using personal identifiers in the imageboard and those who argued for complete anonymity as a more egalitarian mode of communication. Once Anonymous emerged as a "we," it further individuated between those who inscribed its actions within an ethical and political horizon—the so-called moralfags—and the lulzfags, who refused any justification for them. While the lulzfags organized online raids—that is, sudden assaults on websites, individuals, and organizations, which had the primary function of entertaining their participants—the moralfags began coordinating larger campaigns for political purposes.

First with a global campaign against the Church of Scientology and then with a series of operations against corporations and government agencies that restrict access to information and information technology, Anonymous's second individuation marks a transition phase toward an organized political movement. Such actions are coordinated mostly through Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a text-based chat protocol that require users to identify themselves through a handle. Thus, while the imageboard continues to function as a *smooth machine of subjectivation* in which each post both contributes to and is an expression of Anonymous—that is, each dividual transaction can be exclusively attributed to the condividual Anonymous—the IRC network sets in motion a *striated machine of subjectivation* in which pseudonymous users contribute to Anonymous as an open reputation but also grow a personal reputation through their contributions.

In the second part of the chapter, I show how the improper name is further contended between those who use it to denote secrecy and mastery of a superior technical knowledge and those who attach it to social movements that are mostly based in public space. In this third individuation,

Anonymous swings between an abstract pole for which hacking and hacktivism should be mainly concerned with technical advancement and what I call a “deictic pole,” to refer to a form of hacktivism that is strongly attached to local conditions and contextual information. My wager is that this understanding of context implies an apprehension of the vulnerability of the Other—an encounter that Anonymous experiences by witnessing the risks to which Tunisian and Egyptian Anons exposed themselves during the revolutions of January 2011. This notion of human vulnerability is contrasted to the hackers’ search for technical vulnerabilities in computer networks—a search that is associated with the power to hack for its own sake. I conclude that Anonymous’s ability to mediate between the technical and the human may also be seen as a potential for transducing different notions of otherness, technological and corporeal velocities, finite codes, and sensuous languages. Such power may ultimately project the improper name beyond a properly human language and ethics—in a domain where humans and machines will be able to search for and affirm their freedoms only in relation to one another.

THE MINOR, THE TACTICAL, AND THE IMPROPER

Because they are open to unforeseen appropriations, improper names imply an opening of closed spaces and a constant subversion of fixed relations. In this respect, the improper can be likened to two other philosophical concepts: the notion of the minor mode, as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and the notion of tactics, as developed by Michel De Certeau. In their book on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari describe minor literature as a literature whose language is characterized by a high degree of deterritorialization, that is immediately political, and in which “everything takes on a collective value.”²⁴ By extending this concept to the social field, Nicholas Thoburn argues that when minorities find their movements and expressions cramped on all sides, they have to invent a new, “minor” politics—a politics in which individual concerns are *immediately* merged with the social forces and resonate with them in an intensive, continuous exchange.²⁵ This is not only the nomadic and queer politics of migrants and sexual minorities but also, as Stevphen Shukaitis points out, the countercultural politics of punk (with its DIY ethics and

constitutive rejection of talent) and of the pseudonymous strategies discussed in this book. As a mode of creating and elaborating difference, minor politics, writes Shukaitis, refuses “to subsume individual concerns and interests . . . within a collective homogenous general interest (for the sake of the movement and so forth).”²⁶ Rather, such politics is concerned with the power of singularities to transform themselves in the process of transforming the territories they traverse.

Such deterritorializations often rely on tricks and clever usages of resources that are not permanently available but can be tapped to gain temporary advantages. Michel De Certeau defines these clever temporary usages as “tactical” and distinguishes them from the “strategic” power that an institution such as a state, a corporation, a city, or a university exercises over a “place that can be circumscribed as *proper (propre)*.”²⁷ If an institution can leverage this power “for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it,” a tactic “cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization). . . . The ‘proper’ is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always watching for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’”²⁸

De Certeau’s distinction between the tactical and the strategic presents striking similarities to Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between the minor and the major (or molar) modes. Not unlike strategies, major and molar processes consist in the standardization and fixation of a set of relations. This fixed distribution—such as that of statistical analysis—is predicated on the capacity of extracting constants from a homogenous and denumerable space. Spatialization is, in other words, the precondition of every act of mastery, or as De Certeau puts it, “it is the mastery of time through the foundation of an autonomous place.”²⁹ On the contrary, being predicated on the lack of a proper space, minor, tactical, and improper interventions have to make do with what is at hand by taking advantage of opportunities and resources that cannot be stockpiled without becoming strategic and major in their turn.

This is why these interventions should not be identified with specific communities or minorities whose identity is constituted on the basis of structured affiliations. Rather, they should be seen as the movement of those communities and minorities that have no identity, membership, or

constituency of their own—a becoming over which no one has ownership. It is this openness to the becoming of the social that makes it difficult to assign an improper name to a circumscribed subject. And it is precisely this instability of the relationship between signifier and signified that denaturalizes the synthetic function of the name as a rigid designator that fixes the referent.

As Jean-François Lyotard has shown, the proper name is a “pure mark of the designative function” that invariably refers to a subject x independently of the position this occupies in a sentence (as x can be found in the position of addressor, addressee, or referent) at different time intervals (as x designates the same referent at t and at $t + 1$) and on different levels of reality (as x can stand both for a referent endowed with material reality and for a purely fictional one). “This is because to name the referent is not the same as to show its ‘presence,’” writes Lyotard. “To signify is one thing, to name another, and to show still another.”³⁰ But if the proper name is merely an index and an empty link that does not have the power to endow a subject with reality (i.e., to show its existence) nor with sense (i.e., to attribute any property to it), what happens when even the indexical function of the name is destabilized? I shall try to answer this question by first discussing some contrasting interpretations of the referential function of proper names and then considering how the modern state has overcoded such a function as a technique of government.

FIXING A REFERENCE: THE PROPER NAME AS A POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY

A specific strand in the philosophy of language has discussed for a long time whether proper names designate or describe a referent. The origins of this strand date back at least to the time of the disputes among the Sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on language’s ability to accurately represent reality, the divine, and hence to convey or obfuscate the truth.

The basic terms of the dispute are already laid out in Plato’s *Cratylus*, whose formal topic is “the correctness of names.” *Cratylus*—an early philosophical influence on Plato—and Hermogenes call in Socrates as a referee to determine whether names are natural extensions of the things

they describe or are determined by social conventions. Socrates first seems to side with Cratylus's naturalism as he claims that, to accurately represent the essence of things, names must share something with them. Thus names cannot be purely arbitrary. But Socrates also criticizes extreme naturalism by noting that, similar to portraits, names only provide an "outline" of the things they describe. It is only because of this approximation that names can still be distinguished from things. If the copy cannot be told apart from the original, how could we ever discern the truth from falsehood?³¹

The question of names' mimetic accuracy resurfaces in the *Metaphysics*, as Aristotle discusses Antisthenes's paradoxical claim that if we admit that each state of affairs can be described in its singularity by one, and only one, proposition ("one formula, one referent"), then contradiction is no longer possible. Although Aristotle at first dismisses Antisthenes's claim as "foolish," he then concedes that designation precedes signification in that the primary elements of a proposition cannot be defined, but only postulated—in the same way as the bricks, stones, and timbers of a house cannot be derived from this composite entity of matter and form inasmuch as they provide its basic components.³²

Drawing from Aristotle, Lyotard notes that both the distinction between designation and signification and the isomorphism between names and objects, propositions, and state of affairs returns, *mutatis mutandis*, in Wittgenstein's "theory of simples." In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the German philosopher seeks to construct a logically perfect language by positing a fundamental correspondence between the structure of a proposition (or picture) and a state of affairs. The *Tractatus's* project is to design an ideal language that can accurately reflect the world by relying on logical structures that cannot be said but only *shown*, insofar as propositions must share the same logical structures "with reality in order to represent it."³³ Like Aristotle, Wittgenstein maintains that propositions are composed of simple signs (called names) that "cannot be dissected any further" in the same way as states of affairs are complexes that result from a combination of objects that are irreducible to smaller parts. As Bertrand Russell notes in the introduction to the *Tractatus*, this ideal language is based on the fundamental requisite "that there should be one name for every simple, and never the same name for two different simples."³⁴ If the same sign is

employed to designate two different objects, it must be disambiguated by showing that it belongs to two different modes of signification or that it is part of two propositions whose senses are different.³⁵

Here Wittgenstein follows Gottlob Frege's famous distinction between the sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) of a proper name. To refute John Stuart Mill's thesis that proper names denote without connoting, in 1892, Frege had argued that because multiple names can be used to designate the same object (e.g., the morning star Phosphorus and the evening star Hesperus both refer to the same planet, Venus), different names correspond to different modes of presenting the same referent and thereby convey a plurality of senses.³⁶ Along with Russell's theory of descriptions, Frege's distinction between sense and reference came to form the so-called descriptivist theory of names.³⁷ On the basis of the assumption that a proper name is nothing other than an abbreviated or disguised description, the Frege–Russell view—which is nothing but a modern version of Cratylus's naturalism—dominated the philosophy of language for most of the twentieth century, until Saul Kripke struck several blows to it.

In three lectures given at Princeton in 1970, Kripke returned to Mill's theory of direct reference to argue that while the properties and sense of an object may vary across time and space, and depending on social conventions, once the existence of an object has been established, it can no longer be refuted. It follows that the different names used for describing the changing properties of the same object refer to it only under certain circumstances—and may thereby be called *nonrigid designators*—whereas the names that designate an object throughout its existence constantly refer to it and are thereby rigid. Kripke argues that the function of a rigid designator (or proper name) is to fix a referent *in all its possible universes*, independent of whether its properties may change over time. He adds that the reference is fixed through an *initial baptism*, that is to say, by an ostension or a description, or, alternatively, is “determined by a chain, passing the name from link to link.”³⁸ These acts are social in character; that is, the name is successfully assigned to a referent insofar as there is a community of speakers that recognizes this referential relationship.

Even though, being a logician, Kripke is not interested in exploring these acts, his theory of rigid designation allows us to leave behind the

dualism between denotation and signification, which Wittgenstein had tried to solve by assuming that the former precedes the latter and positing, in line with a long-standing logocentric tradition in Western thought, a fundamental isomorphism between logical structures and worldly structures. Once we recognize that the reference of a proper name does not satisfy certain properties described by the name, but rather that the referential relationship is socially constructed, we can focus on the actual communities, institutions, and practices that enable or bar the societal adoption of a proper name.

Through this line of reasoning, we can return to our previous reflection on symbolic power and the institutionalization of naming. If within familial and tribal structures proper names are passed from link to link, through a communication chain, the emergence of molar institutions such as the church and the state entails an inscription of the name into a birth register. Whereas in the great civilizations of antiquity, such as the Persian, Roman, and Chinese empires, names were registered mostly for tax purposes and for the determination of available military manpower, with the emergence of the modern nation-state, the birth name becomes a political technology that enables the scientific management of a population.

Michel Foucault has argued that the development of the modern science of government—what he calls “governmentality”—would have not been possible without the political usage of statistical analysis. Beginning in the eighteenth century, statistics, writes Foucault, “discovers and gradually reveals that the population possesses its own regularities: its death rate, its incidence of disease, its regularities of accidents”³⁹—and also, and perhaps preconditionally, its birthrate, for which the birth record is the elementary unit. By becoming legal, the proper name enters a whole network of apparatuses (demographic records, criminal records, fiscal records, voting records, immunization and health records) through which the state can both identify an individual and effect calculations and operations whose domain is the population. From the state’s standpoint, fixing a reference—that is, ensuring that a legal name identifies one and only subject—is thus an essential precondition of modern politics. It is through the legal codification of the initial baptism that a government gets to know its people and can target either specific individuals through the

security apparatus or segments of the population through the leverage of political economy. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we may say that this double operation—which is both selective and extensive, individuating and massifying—is predicated on the assumption that there should be one name and only one name for every subject and never the same name for two different subjects.

COLLECTIVE ASSEMBLAGES OF ENUNCIATION

As noted in the opening pages of this introduction, the main distinctive feature of improper names is to provide anonymity and a medium for recognition to their users. By failing to designate clearly identifiable referents, improper names make it difficult for authorities to track down specific individuals while enabling individuals to participate in social and political activities on an informal basis. The primary political function of improper names is thus to challenge the governmental techniques whereby an individual is classified as a subject of knowledge, a patient, a criminal, a taxpayer, and so forth. Because the state apparatuses produce the subject as a political, epistemological, and biological unit that is always fundamentally *in place*, those subjectivities that cannot be properly located pose a fundamental threat to state power.

As previously noted, the secondary political function of the improper name is to mediate between heterogeneous practices and organizational methods. Such mediation is possible precisely because the designating function of the proper name is indifferent to heterogeneity and change. Kripke's theory of rigid designation assumes in fact that the distinctive feature of the proper name is to designate a referent regardless of its changing properties. Slavoj Žižek has taken Kripke's antidescriptivism one step further by noting that "this guaranteeing the identity of an object in all counterfactual situations—through a change of all its descriptive features—is *the retroactive effect of naming itself*. It is the name itself, the signifier, which supports the identity of the object."⁴⁰

Responding to Žižek, Ernesto Laclau recognizes that, in the sociopolitical field, some signifiers empty themselves out of their attachment to a particular referent and give unity to an object by representing a heterogeneous assemblage of actors and demands. Yet Laclau adds the important

proviso that “the reverse movement also operates: [empty signifiers] can never fully control which demands they embody and represent.”⁴¹ From this angle, if a proper name establishes the unity of the designated object retroactively, a shared alias can designate such unity *only to refer to the ensemble of the name’s uses*. As soon as we consider individual and contingent uses (e.g., *a* Luther Blissett, *some* Monty Cantsins), heterogeneity and difference resurface. My wager is that rather than expressing heterogeneity *or* homogeneity, difference *or* totality, the improper is a mode of mediation between these two poles. This mediation is evident not only in the passage from the one to the many (and vice versa) but also in the relation between signifying and a-signifying practices within the assemblage.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the case of the Luddite assemblage. Luddite subjectivation emerges from the breakdown of a traditional order (the Guild system) and the abrupt appearance of a network of illegal practices (machine breaking) and linguistic expressions (threatening letters, ballads and declarations) that do not stand in a referential relationship to one another. In the Luddite assemblage, machine breaking is the pragmatic side of a sophisticated rhetorical strategy in which threats acquire the force of action and actions endow threats with performative force, even though the destruction of machinery is distinct and relatively independent from Luddite discourse. This means that the subversion of the proper name as a political technology of the state is set in motion by a collective assemblage of enunciation that has the faculty of speech and the power to act on things *without letting its words represent its deeds*.

As a collective assemblage of enunciation, an improper name is thus an articulation of linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions—what Deleuze and Guattari call a semiotic system and a pragmatic system—between which “there is neither a relationship of correspondence nor a cause-effect relationship nor a signifier-signified relation” but only reciprocal presupposition and “piecemeal insertions.”⁴² This impersonal notion of the assemblage allows us to think of actions without a human subject that is formally in charge of them. For example, the Allen Smithee filmography is an assemblage of movies whose author is a non-human agent, a ready-made signature that performs a specific function within the film industry, namely, to solve labor disputes between film

directors and film producers. And, as we shall see, the software used by Anonymous's hackers and activists to coordinate street protests, denial of service attacks, and hacking operations often follows a logic of its own, which precedes and conditions human agency and will.

To sum up, in this introductory chapter, I have examined the notion of the improper name as the expression of a process of subjectivation that is neither collective nor individual but rather conindividual, that is, simultaneously collective and individual. Although improper names encompass both collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names, the distinctive feature of the improper name is to be opened to unforeseen appropriations and third-party usages—something that may not pertain to all collective pseudonyms. Even though the mode of disposition and usage of a collective pseudonym may be initially defined by an authorizing context, to be thought as improper, a name has to undergo a certain level of dissemination in the public sphere. The historic conditions under which an improper name is introduced and circulates are by definition subject to change. In modern and premodern times, as a collective assemblage of enunciation—that is, an ensemble of semiotic and pragmatic expressions that enjoy a relative autonomy from one another—the improper name challenges the modern state's invention of the legal name as a political technology of identification. As the name of the author acquires an economic value, the improper name challenges the conflation of property and propriety that is set in motion by the emergence of the modern culture industry. Finally, with the rise of the information society, the accelerated destabilization of the relationship between signs and referents sets in motion assemblages of enunciation that reverse Web 2.0's obsession with identity, reputation, and status.

In the conclusion, I return to the contention that improper names are singular processes of subjectivation that cannot paradoxically be attached to a subject to deepen the relationship between the improper, the common, and the community. After revisiting a recent philosophical debate on the negative, "inoperative," and "unavowable" character of the community, I suggest that improper names can be read, following Simondon, as the transductive actualization of a potential *and*, following the deconstructive tradition, as the expression of a community that assumes the impossibility of being completely transparent to itself. Even more, I

suggest that improper names allow us to bring together immanence and deconstruction, monist and dualist philosophies, by advancing an impersonal politics that shuttles between the constitution of a subject from within and its ongoing effacement from without. Such shuttling ultimately points to the improper as a mode of mediation that is strictly connected to the common, increases or decreases its power depending on usage, and opens up the subject onto the many it is.