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Scatological Humour and the Absent Anthropology of Privacy

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Article abstract

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Abstract

This article addresses the puzzle of scatological humour among privacy advocates. Drawing on ethnographic work in Britain in 2014 and in Germany between 2019–2023, it advances a consideration of the phenomenon as a form of "boundary play" (Nippert-Eng 2005). Deploying the transgressive exposure of behaviours of a human body, as expressive of transgressions across a social body, scatological references use satire to make statements around contemporary digital surveillance. Splicing this to a noteworthy absence of anthropological scholarship on the concept of privacy, the article positions privacy as an extrinsic concept, alive at the boundary, that struggles to travel across cultural contexts. While continuing to support the local extrinsic work that privacy performs, it suggests the need to construct stronger architectures of value around other phenomena synonymous with not being readable.

Introduction

In August 2014, the first privacy-oriented protest took place outside the UK's communications monitoring centre—GCHQ.[1] The event followed in the wake of Edward Snowden's revelations about mass monitoring that the centre was engaged in (Lyon 2015), as well as a legal challenge mounted by several civil liberties organisations to these reported practices.[2] Yet as the protest unfolded outside the gates of the facility in Cheltenham over a holiday weekend, there was little description of what privacy rights consisted of, nor of how they might be upheld. Instead, what ensued was almost entirely unstructured play. Within this space of spontaneity, a curious performance took place.

After some hushed activity in one of the tents in the small encampment, three women surfaced, swallowing giggles, and began pacing their way rapidly towards the entrance. They were carrying a bright blue children's potty containing an orange liquid. Sensing the emergence of something, several other protesters soon strode over, as did the stationed police officers, all assembling in a small circle around the object. After a short satirical speech by one of those present about how GCHQ had been "taking the piss" (an English idiom implying treating someone without respect), they proceeded to "toast" the occupants of the building and drink the contents of the potty with a theatrical relish. Although more took place throughout the weekend, it was the imbibing of symbolic human waste (which was, in fact, orange juice) that captured the imagination in the weeks that followed. As the ethnographer of the movement that had summoned the protest

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[1] The event took place between August 29 and September 1, 2014, and was called by the movement Anonymous as a protest against mass surveillance. More detail on the event can be found in Peacock (2025).

[2] See Bowcott (2014) for a summary of the case.

(Peacock 2025), it also captured mine. The experience obliquely recalled that of the proto-anthropologist Captain John Bourke (1934), who, upon witnessing an elaborate joking display of urine drinking by the Zuñi inhabitants of New Mexico, was prompted to collect evidence of scatologic rites across the world.

This essay addresses the puzzle of scatological humour among privacy activists and what this has to tell us about privacy. It does so from the perspective of a different place and time, namely Germany at the turn of the 2020s. Since at least the 1970s, but with renewed vigour under the impact of digitalization, Germany has emerged as a world centre for civic mobilization around privacy and data protection. Unlike elsewhere, where it is normally the lack of resistance to surveillance that is noteworthy (Stalder 2002), over the past twenty years, Germany has witnessed small and large-scale forms of protest against a gamut of new forms of digital monitoring.[3] Now embedded within a thriving subculture of events, media, and associations collectively known as Netzpolitik, those who mobilise for privacy in Germany may be a small minority, but their activities can spill over into the popular consciousness. Here, I focus on one corner of this subculture occupied by the electro-punk band Systemabsturz (System Failure). In 2021, the duo released a song called "Daten daten Daten" ("data data data"), a political satire about the use of dating apps that, in its lyrics and accompanying video, makes a series of scatological jokes. I explore this form of humour through the lens of what Christina Nippert-Eng (2005) calls "boundary play." Inverting the individuation and seclusion that normatively surrounds sanitary practices in twenty-first century Germany, the song plays upon the boundaries of the toilet cubicle to make a statement about data extraction. Much like the performance outside GCHQ, though the experience of transgression is satirically expressed through the biological, it is in substance social and political.

Developing this ethnography, this article extends the arguments of those who submit that privacy possesses no stable intrinsic meaning (Bennett 2011; Bridges 2017; Helm and Seubert 2020; Solove 2008). Instead, its significance for advocates appears as extrinsic, erupting at the site of boundaries themselves. It applies these insights to the problem of why, despite some efforts, an anthropology of the phenomenon remains largely absent. In contrast to substantial literatures on other forms of concealment, a comparative anthropology of privacy cannot be said to presently exist. As a phenomenon operable at the point of boundary formation, here privacy is shown to be a deeply local notion that struggles to travel across cultural contexts. Rather than throwing the baby out with the bath water however, I conclude that privacy should (and undoubtedly will) continue to do its local extrinsic work. Nevertheless, a more robust political response to the rapid changes in surveillance ushered in by digitalization, particularly at a supra-national level, would involve endowing cultural value to a greater range of concepts synonymous with not being readable.

Joking in Netzpolitik

The intensive growth of digital surveillance in some parts of the world over the past twenty years has been overwhelmingly attended by what has been named the "privacy paradox." While citizens and consumers purport to care very much about privacy, this is readily sacrificed in exchange for access to social goods. From 2019–2023, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork on the relative exception that Germany poses to this problem.[4] Across the Republic, especially in the former West, civic actors have mobilized both individually and collectively in recent years to defend the values of privacy and data protection that they cherish. Employing an anthropological approach that situates cultural phenomena within broader socially and regionally specific environments, I explored privacy advocacy efforts within the world of Netzpolitik—the

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[3] This includes data retention (*Vorratsdatenspeicherung*), Google Street View, facial recognition, upload filters, and recent EU-wide legislation for client-side scanning, among many others.

[4] From 2019 to 2023, I undertook approximately fourteen months of fieldwork in the cities of Munich, Berlin, Hamburg, and Bielefeld in several long and short stays that excluded the period of COVID-19 lockdowns. This included seventeen formal interviews and was triangulated with archival research in local district courts (*Amtsgerichte*).

name of an influential news blog and podcast that connects members, and the name that they sometimes use to refer to themselves collectively.[5] As part of this fieldwork, I participated in the life of twenty-three associations that explicitly ascribe some value to privacy.[6] This entailed a spectrum of proximity, from subscribing to email lists and archiving websites at one end, to collaborating on privacy campaigns at the other.

During one of the latter, I get talking to an elderly German about why they oppose surveillance. Their resistance extends at least as far back as the 1980s, when they took part in mass protests against plans to hold a census in the former West Germany (Hannah 2010), and among other things they run a discussion group on the topic. Their answer, however, betrays little of the seriousness and the depth of this commitment. Instantly and emphatically they respond, "Because when I'm sitting on the toilet (*Klo*), I don't want anybody looking at me!" This joking reference to sanitary practices as a meaningful battleground for privacy, though not ubiquitous, is far from unique. In an online example (see Figure 1), a meme circulated in opposition to EU legislation on data retention illustrates a man sitting on the lavatory while a car carrying a variety of non-human animals crashes through the door.[7] The driver captures the moment on camera while one of the passengers comments on the scene with condescension—"sweet."

Figure 1: This meme was posted on X (formerly Twitter) by the Ralph Ruthe account on August 15, 2017, and it was shared by the Max Peal account the same day, with the hashtag #noVDS (no *Vorratsdatenspeicherung*). *Courtesy of Bulls Press; ©Ruthe/Distr. Bulls*

[5] The news blog is called netzpolitik.org, and the podcast is called Logbuch:Netzpolitik.

[6] These are: all-Kollektiv; AlgorithmWatch Gmbh; anna elbe; Bits & Bäume; c-base e.V; CCC Hansestadt Hamburg e.V; Chaos Compuer Club e.V; cryptoparty; Digital Courage e.V; Digitale Freiheit e.V; Digitale Gesellschaft e.V; Disruption Network Lab e.V; D64 Zentrum für digitalen Fortschritt e.V; Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte e.V; Load e.V; Mastodon Gmbh; Mehr Demokratie e.V; netzpolitik.org e.V; No-Spy e.V; Topio e.V; republica Gmbh; posteo e.K; xhain hack + makespace gemeinnützige UG. The letters, or lack thereof, after their names indicate their legal registration status.

[7] See also a post by the Pirate Party in Nürnburg around the same campaign (Piraten Nürnberg 2015).

The most sophisticated example of this particular brand of humour, however, comes from Systemabsturz. In 2021, they release their debut album, *Überwachung zum Mitsingen* (*Singing Along with Surveillance*), containing nine tracks that explore the phenomenon from different angles. As the band self-effacingly jests on their website, they are "probably the best and worst privacy electro-punk band in the world" (Systembsturz n.d.). In other words, they are the only band that falls into this peculiar genre, and for this reason, beside their musical merits, their songs can be seen as a soundtrack to the current left-radical edge of Netzpolitik. A regular feature in the hackerspaces, clubs, and conferences that constitute its current geography and ritual calendar, their popularity in this domain is such that, while *they* are singing along with surveillance, their audiences are often singing along with them, faithfully reciting their lyrics in an index of consensus. The second track on the album, "Daten daten Daten" is a satire of the use of dating applications such as Tinder, Grindr, and OkCupid, and the data economies that all of these platforms are engaged in. It contains the following chorus:

Sag mir wie du heißt	Tell me what your name is
Und ich sag dir wann du sch**ßt	And I'll tell you when you sh*t
Wem du dann auf Tinder likest	Who you'll like on Tinder
Und dass sie sehr gerne reist	And that she likes to travel
Das ist alles sehr intim	It's all very intimate
Doch du musst auch uns verstehen	But you have to understand
Würden wir's nicht weitergeben	If we didn't hand it over
Würden wir nicht überleben	We wouldn't survive

The scatological anchor of the song in the first verse becomes more pronounced in the accompanying video. The video begins with short clips introducing three different characters in three different settings: first, a man on rollerblades inside a large roller park; second, a woman doing yoga in what appears to be her living room, surrounded by plants, books, and lighted candles; and, lastly, a man with glasses reading a book on the sofa, with stickies on the pages indicating concentrated study. The montage of each character ends when they check their smartphone, at which point, echoing the aesthetics of the apps themselves, the image acquires a border and slides left or right out of shot. Significantly, the first point at which all three characters are in the same visual frame is when they enter their toilet cubicles. The first resembles a public toilet with graffiti scrawled on the walls, while the second two are represented as toilets inside the home, decorated with a poster and plastic flowers respectively. The viewer's perspective then jumps from their feet and shoes up to their head and arms where, it transpires, all three of them are examining their smartphones. Text boxes indicate that they are messaging one another. The video and the song explore a narrative of romantic failure on the part of the third character, who is then persuaded to spend more money on the app. Close to the end, all three characters close their eyes and make the sign of the cross around their head and shoulders, phone clasped in the crossing hand. This moment signals a transition to the final scenes of abandon, in which they all respond to the escalating extraction demands of the app by moving more wildly. The video ends when the third character flushes the toilet and leaves.

Bathrooms and Boundary Play

This connection between privacy, surveillance, and the social organization of sanitary practices has substantial precedents. Indeed, the English word "private" comes from the same root as the word "privy," a common shorthand for lavatory (a "Privy midden") in the wake of the industrial revolution.[8] A similar slippage can be found in German, where the colloquial word for lavatory—"Klo"—is cognate with the word for the place of monastic retreat, "Kloster." In a comparative study of privacy across cultures, anthropologist Barrington Moore Jr. (1984: 59) goes as far as to argue that "There is no very perilous leap from the discussion of intimacy and emotional commitment to an analysis of the place of privacy in the 'intimate' physiological functions of the human body." Reinforcing his claim, virtually every focused study of privacy over the past twenty years approaches, at some point, the question of bathroom habits (Nippert-Eng 2010; Skinner-Thompson 2020; Solove 2008; Véliz 2024). In Nippert-Eng's (2010) investigation of attitudes towards privacy among middle and upper-middle class residents of Chicago, she notes the frequency with which the topic recurs in the stories recounted by her interlocutors.

These connections are deep. In his influential book *Understanding Privacy*, legal scholar Daniel Solove (2008) cites an English text from 1619:

> Let not thy privy members be
>
> layd upon to be view'd
>
> it is most shameful and abhord,
>
> detestable and rude.
>
> Retaine not urine nor the winde
>
> which doth thy body vex
>
> so it be done with secresie
>
> let that not thee perplex.
>
> (cited in Solove 2008: 146)

The timing of the text evidences some of the semantic shifts that were taking place in England around the word privy. Centuries before there was a Privy midden, or a privy member, there was a Privy Council—a consulate body that wielded the prerogatives of sovereign power—and in its disassembly laid some of the conditions for a democratic state (Dicey 1887). The Privy Council was so-called because its proceedings were conducted in secret, even reputedly inside the King's bedchamber. Indeed, one of the common features of kingship that has been observed by historians and anthropologists is the very different set of norms that exist around the sanitary habits of the king (Kantorowicz 1957; Moore Jr. 1984; Valeri 1985). These semantic shifts thereby travelled alongside far-reaching changes in European socio-political orders, as former regimes of monarchical sovereignty partly or wholly ceded to the popular sovereignty of nation-states, a period also marked by transformations in sanitation (Elias 2012). The lines between the social, the political, and the biological, when it comes to sanitary practices, are thus frequently far from clear. Discourses and behaviours around one may elliptically correspond to the other, and vice versa. A

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[8] A "Privy midden" was an outhouse containing a receptacle for human waste, which became a common housing feature in Britain's expanding industrial cities during the nineteenth-century.

contemporary example from the English-speaking world can be located in the joking meme depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The first appearance of this image is in a post on Reddit by Itmaver1ck on July 19, 2018 with the title, "How is this for an open door?" Since then, it has been used to make a variety of references to digital surveillance, particularly with reference to major messaging platforms.

In Germany, scatological humour is a feature of life in general (Dundes 1989), but here I would draw attention to the specific symbolic importance of toilet cubicles. In all of the above examples, it is the lavatory door, or lack thereof, that stands in as the threshold of transgression. In the video for "Daten daten Daten," it is the opening scene, in which we view all three characters in these spaces, that instigates the culture shock around which the rest of the narrative turns. Rather than representing unique individuals, however, these interiors have an ideal-typical quality, representing the different forms of sociality being broken into. This is most apparent for the man at the skate park, where the cubicle is embroidered with written inscriptions, in ways reminiscent of others in the counter-cultural spaces of Netzpolitik. Indeed, the notion that a toilet cubicle is not simply a place to fulfil a sanitary function, but one where visitors may communicate with each other about values and ideals, reached a particular intensity in this sphere in 2012. A mural painted on the inside door of the cubicle in the hackerspace c-base became the subject of a debate around misogyny in hacker culture (cf. Brooke 2022). Around this time, the cubicle registered its own Twitter (now X) account @klotuer ("toilet door") and continued to "speak" online for several years afterwards.[9] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the account became a medium for a subsequent stream of scatological jokes about surveillance.

Closely linked to the notion that a toilet cubicle is a space of autonomy is the idea that it can be a space in which to generate forms of alterity. The scene in which the three characters make the sign of the cross with their smartphones, referencing the Catholic practice of blessing oneself, before breaking free of its

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[9] At the time of writing, the account has made 115 posts, the last one in August 2018 (see https://x.com/klotuer).

repressions, is likewise not without precursor. By his own account, Martin Luther's schismatic insight on the personal nature of divinity took place in the "cloaca"—the sanitary closet (Erikson 1962: 204). His critiques of the Catholic Church that provided the textual impetus for the Reformation in Germany were also frequently couched in scatological terms (Dundes 1989). More recently, non-normative representations of, and practices in and around, toilet cubicles have attended the flourishing of LGBT+ communities in Germany, such as the West Berlin cult film *Taxi zum Klo* (1981). In this manner, the Berghain, the iconic Berlin nightclub referenced elsewhere in "Daten daten Daten" where clubbers unite "under the hegemony of Berlin's gay community" (Alexis Waltz quoted in Andersson 2022: 452), spatializes the different set of boundaries between public and private that can play out. While the club maintains its notoriously strict policy of creating a space free from digital recording, some of its toilet cubicles have had their doors entirely removed.

Theorising the amusement that can derive from the manipulation of cultural categories, Christena Nippert-Eng (2005) introduces the concept of "boundary play." Though not always, boundary play is frequently spatial, turning around the existence of physical boundaries such as walls, doors, or gates, as well as the normal set of social behaviours that should happen on either side of them. Among the examples she presents are children gleefully playing inside a dog crate and the translucent walls of the bathroom stalls at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where those on the other side can see shadows of activities within. The amusement the play offers hinges on the presence of "normal categorical knowledge" among the players (Nippert-Eng 2005: 305)—what should be happening around these boundaries but is clearly not. It can thereby inspire extra relish in onlookers who possess this knowledge but who are not themselves part of the game. Nippert-Eng (2005) sees boundary play as a deeply enjoyable, humanising, world-building, and potentially dangerous undertaking. It is in her analysis the somewhat devilish complement to "boundary work" (Nippert-Eng 1996), the more austere practice of creating, maintaining, and modifying categories, that coherent forms of cultural life depend on. It is no accident, she tells us, that her examinations of boundary work and boundary play segue into a sociological study of privacy. For she sees "boundary work along the public-private divide" as the focus of her book (Nippert-Eng 2010: 10).

All of the above illustrations can be interpreted through this optic. To Nippert-Eng's (1996, 2005, 2010) analysis, though, they add a political dimension. Take, for instance, the opening incident outside GCHQ. The scatological play takes place around a spatial boundary, namely the metal gates that provide the central aperture into the security complex. All participants share this categorical knowledge that the normal function around the gate is for cars to drive in and out in order for their occupants to carry out the work within. This knowledge is also shared by the attendant police officers, who are summoned as a passive audience to the play by being offered a sip of the orange juice as it is passed around. This play is also the flipside of other more serious forms of political boundary work undertaken by those at the protest, which involve complicated arrangements to try to avoid the gaze of the security services. There is also a visible investment in boundary work by the security services themselves, manifested in the helicopter that thrums occasionally overhead or the detention of one of its administrators at a British airport, that prevents them from attending. In these deeply asymmetric conditions, the diminutive scene humanises those playing, affording them the passing vitality that is acquired by laughter in the absence of a more enduring resource.

This also seems likely to be the case in the scene witnessed by Captain John Bourke (1934) in 1881. The episode as relayed by Bourke (1934) holds all of the elements of boundary play. First, there is the manipulation of the categorical meaning of a space—in his case, the living room of the governor's house, which has been specially cleared and cleaned in order for the Zuñi to perform a ceremonial dance. Then there is the presence of a deadpan audience, here constituted by Bourke, who possesses normal categorical knowledge about what should be happening, but is not himself in on the game. Finally, there is the laughter, the "roaring merriment" that reverberates through Bourke's (1934: 6) vivid description as the Zuñi imbibe generous quantities of what is reportedly waste. Like many colonial anthropologists, because of his own political commitments, Bourke (1934) is blind to those of the people he describes and, by viewing the

episode as a timeless ceremony, misses the joke entirely. We do not know from Bourke's (1934) account what kind of colonial surveillance these Zuñi were routinely under, but given his own role as a military officer in the Apache wars around the same time, it can reasonably be assumed that violence was not far away.

Elsewhere on their album, Systemabsturz address the subject of state surveillance in the song "Staatstrojaner" ("State Trojans") and the blending of state and corporate surveillance in "Verdächtig" ("Under Suspicion"). The lyrics of both play around the transgressive knowledge of intimate behaviours. "Verdächtig" also contains scatological themes, with a reference to "peeing standing up" and a video scene that involves writing statements on a roll of loo paper. These are, however, more mixed in and muted than the references in "Daten daten Daten." "Staatstrojaner," meanwhile, takes a different tack, assuming the form of a satirical "love story" ("Liebesgeschichte") in which smartphone users are entered into a romantic relationship with the state from which they ultimately seek to establish distance.[10] While both of these tracks contain themes of transgression, they do not inhabit the genre of boundary play that Nippert-Eng (2005) theorises as closely, turning around the manipulation of normal categorical knowledge. In other words, the cultural boundary against Big Tech (which is not, incidentally, a territorial boundary against Silicon Valley based platforms) assumes an added electricity in the band's oeuvre. This sensibility finds many reflections in the serious fora of Netzpolitik, on which there is not space to elaborate here. Instead, I offer an episode by way of illustration. In the same week in 2022 when Silicon Valley based billionaire Elon Musk announced his plans to buy Twitter, he was also reportedly refused entry at the door of the Berghain (Biselli 2022; Tsjeng 2022; Weiss 2022). This tiny victory of boundary work by Berlin's counterculture against the businessman, in the absence of larger structural agency (the takeover is completed later in the year), travels mirthfully through its channels.

Privacy Problems

Scholarly critiques of privacy abound. Felix Stalder (2002: 122) identifies that the idea of privacy as a "bubble" that surrounds each individual applies a nineteenth-century conceptual framework to a twenty-first century problem—with insidious political effects. More recently, Colin Bennett (2011: 485) goes further to argue that the inadequacy of privacy, both as a concept and as a source for policy-making, has practically reached the level of "conventional wisdom" in surveillance studies (see also Helm and Seubert 2020). The peculiar nature of this inadequacy is precisely diagnosed by Solove (2008). Assembling a swathe of material from across law, scholarship, and the arts, he convincingly argues that attempts to locate a "common denominator" for privacy have failed (Solove 2008: 9). While definitions of privacy may share, in Ludwig Wittgenstein's terms, family resemblances, their constellations in each context vary to such a degree that no "core" or "essential' meaning can be claimed (Solove 2008: 8). Instead, the policymaker or jurist should attend to what Solove (2008: 99) calls "privacy problems"—the forms of social disruption that are generating a discourse of privacy. Through Solove's (2008) arguments, privacy emerges as a reactive phenomenon that ignites around efforts to protect existing forms of social life. The value of privacy thereby arises, for Solove (2008: 9), not from a shared meaning, but from the value ascribed to the "activities" it is being summoned to preserve. His analysis is significant, as it ennobles the departure from definitional questions—which can be culturally brittle—towards others of social change and social conflict.

Though the experienced public speakers of Netzpolitik will often hold a definition of privacy they can easily reach for, the polysemy of the concept is widely accepted. This is particularly illustrated when I attend a series of online and in-person events gathered under the umbrella "Privacy Week." The week is inaugurated with an online roundtable discussion between several of the organisers and key participants. The discussion spans a wide range of topics encircling the event and its subject matter—readings, lectures, workshops, club nights, collectives, encryption, and open-source platforms, as well as the history of Privacy Week and its

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[10] Sophia in conversation with Markus Beckedahl (2022) on the netzpolitik.org podcast in January 2022.

own decisions about language and recording. Yet it is only in the closing minutes of a conversation lasting over an hour that speakers are asked by the chair, with an air of spontaneity, what privacy actually (eigentlich) means for them. The answers again are heterogenous: varying from the philosophical, to the technical, to the juristic, and they are all framed as a personal take rather than programmatic for the work they are doing. They agree that they do not need to agree about privacy. A paradox persists though. While they are happy to accept that privacy possesses no common denominator, it remains the overarching reason they are all assembled. Scott Skinner-Thompson (2020: 3) puts it eloquently when he says, privacy is not just all or nothing, "in some contexts, it is everything."

There is thus a persistent and intriguing black hole when it comes to privacy. What is Skinner-Thompson's (2020) "everything" or Solove's (2008) "activities" that must be protected? Parallel to the futile search for privacy's common denominator in other fields, in the 1980s, Barrington Moore Jr. (1984) undertook an anthropological journey to answer this question ethnographically. Moore (1984) assumes a fairly classic liberal definition of privacy as freedom from intrusion, which is consistently oppugned by the societies he discusses (indeed, his conclusion that community is the enemy of privacy is immediately belied by the very existence of Netzpolitik). This leads him, towards the end of the book, to concede the possibility that, in some societies, the concept may not exist at all. Yet he is still content to describe the desire for privacy as a "panhuman" trait (Moore 1984: 276), with unsettling implications for the members of these societies. Like previous attempts in anthropology at identifying universal categories, which are themselves predicated on a complex web of ethnocentric assumptions, not only was the project intellectually biased, it was also politically dangerous. The black hole is the substance of cultural life itself, which cannot be reduced to categorical analysis. No other anthropologist has attempted a comparative study of privacy before or since, rendering Moore's (1984) text a valuable exercise and demonstration of the limits of Western universalism.

Since this endeavour, the study of privacy has been largely absent from anthropology. In a recent interdisciplinary handbook on this subject, the chapter addressing the discipline arrives at the very end, with Sjaak van der Geest (2018: 417) observing that, to date, "There is no classic anthropological ethnography that takes local ideas and practices of privacy as its central theme of research."[11] Given the problematic nature of Moore's (1984) undertaking, we could allow this silence to speak. For it exists in a stark and dramatic contrast to a vast wealth of literature addressing phenomena that could be re-read through the lens of privacy. To offer a summary list: secrecy (Verdery 2022; Webster 1932), masking (Errington 1974; Lévi-Strauss 1983), concealment (Mahmood 2005; Taussig 1999), anonymity (Coleman 2014; Frois 2009; Peacock 2025), and more recently, opacity (Buitron and Steinmüller 2023; Duranti 2015; Peacock 2024) are all the subject of ethnographic monographs as well as comparative analyses. This attention demonstrates that, while anthropologists may not have concerned themselves greatly with privacy, the notion of not being visible or legible has been a persistent question in the field.

Here, I take the absent anthropology of privacy, and the presence of scatological humour among privacy advocates, as differing expressions of the same phenomenon. Anthropologically speaking, we could consider privacy as a defensive discourse that arises at the site of cultural boundaries, as well as being productive of them. Privacy is not the banquet within, but the watchman at the gate. For this reason, it has played a significant role as one of the few remaining value concepts in highly technologized societies (with remarkable portability across the political spectrum) that has the capacity to restrain what Skinner-Thompson (2020: 3) calls "surveillance violence."[12] All of the sibling concepts listed above have, in the

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[11] This strong claim entails overlooking Nippert-Eng's *Islands of Privacy* (2010). The point may be moot. While Nippert-Eng (2010) does formally align with sociology and its methods, the work has much to contribute to anthropology.

[12] Another is the concept of confidentiality, particularly patient confidentiality in health settings, which is coming under increasing strain in an era of digitized and datafied health.

contemporary world, taken on largely negative associations that greatly inhibit their political potential.[13] It remains the case, as Bennett (2011) argues, that privacy is here to stay. Yet in view of the escalating demands for legibility and transparency across virtually all corners of the digital world, a wider value transformation is needed. Instead of configuring forms of non-readability as morally suspect, they are better viewed as intrinsic to our capacity to develop and relate as human actors.

Conclusion

This essay has considered scatological humour among privacy advocates as a political act. Using the involuntary exposure of intimate sanitary practices as symbolic of the transgressive quality of some kinds of digital transaction, advocates draw lines in the sand. These lines are not only moral but also social, demarcating insiders from outsiders, members from non-members. In their symbolic application of the biological body, this form of humour exhibits the presence of sentiments that a social body has been involuntarily breached. Attending closely to the music of Systemabsturz, I explore this humour as an expression of boundary play, the joking, and ultimately means rather than ends-driven counterpart to boundary work. Boundary play assists in the construction of cultural worlds, and therefore the ability to resist new attempts at mediating these worlds—for instance through the creation of information-hungry dating apps—by others.

In so doing, it speaks to ongoing debates around privacy. Here, privacy is conceived as an extrinsic concept, alive at the boundary, that becomes more pressing in conditions of social change—in this case, technological change. While it remains significant as an apparatus of boundary work and play, according to the above sources, most surveillance scholars would agree that it alone has not been sufficient at maintaining certain forms of ethical integrity against a tide of digital surveillance. Through her ethnographic work with indigent mothers in the US, Khiara Bridges (2017) makes the strong claim that, for this group, the right to privacy enshrined in the US constitution is inaccessible. It is inaccessible because, she argues, in this context, the value of privacy is overruled by the moral construction of poverty, the notion that there is a hierarchy of economic actors who bear different kinds of rights (Bridges 2017). She therefore tilts the problem away from privacy and towards this moral logic itself, of which the denial of privacy rights is an outcome (Bridges 2017). The practical application of the argument I am advancing makes a similar move. Privacy is valuable because it is a value, in contrast to secrecy, masking, anonymity, and so on, which can all be framed to different degrees as morally suspect. The challenge for civil actors then becomes, as digital surveillance continues to increase and transform, not simply to "resist" these transformations, but to build new architectures of value around their antithesis—whatever that may signify.

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[13] For one example, see Claire Birchall (2021) on secrecy.

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