

# Trolling Toward the Human: Cyber Artifacts, Social Justice, and a Queering of Intercorporeality<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

How can I know *you* if I don't know what you are hiding from *me*? In making sense of humanity we often ignore the queerer moments of the human experience, these "fragments of human capacities,"<sup>2</sup> hidden from view. A queer notion of making sense could be, in the words of Ernesto Martinez, to "think from ... an understanding of identity and experience as useful resources for the acquisition of better, more accurate knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Thinking from personal queer identity and experience is salient to my concern with dialogue in social justice classroom spaces, specifically that there might be a limitation to what we can learn about each other: "I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it. But this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communication."<sup>4</sup>

With a queer mindset, I accept this limitation and seek to acquire knowledge differently: *trolling* for these human fragments. Drawing on both the phenomenological language of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, referred to above, and the queer methodological approaches of Deborah Britzman, Sara Ahmed, and Judith Butler, we can enrich classroom conversations around social justice by legitimizing the use of cyber-trolling artifacts as a *straw person* entry point for interrogating social justice ideas in academic discourse.

First I explore how the phenomenon of trolling came from queer non-normative experiences, and how this notion of trolling evolved into part of modern day internet parlance. Next, I consider how we troll past normative spaces to create hidden worlds in response to the normative confines of dialogue in social justice classroom spaces. Finally, I suggest that these trolling responses

to social justice topics might actually be used as “cyber artifacts,” or texts to be critically interrogated within classrooms, enriching collective understanding of human responses to social justice dialogue.

## A QUEER JOURNEY

Queer history is steeped in a tradition of both hiding fragments of human identity and developing techniques for trolling these fragments, thereby becoming a framework with which to uncover deeper human understanding. While a more detailed exploration of my usage of both “queer” and “troll” will unfold later in this article, it is useful to understand that the term “trolling” has deeply queer roots, and can be traced to the ostensibly dead gay language known as *British Polari*, meaning to “wander around looking for sex.”<sup>55</sup> As an artifact of gay history, trolling manifests itself beyond gay language codes into the gay hanky codes of the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and even into hookup applications used commonly today.

Imagine you are in a café, and there is a businessman in an expensive suit at another table. Perhaps you are able to read his performance in terms of race, class, gender, mannerisms etc. Then he pops up on your Grindr app with a profile that reads: *leather daddy ISO hookup*. Outside queer culture, this description seems baffling: to understand it you would have to know that Grindr is an application that allows users in close proximity to see their hidden queer desires. Further, you would need to know that *ISO* means “in search of,” and that *leather daddy* means an older dominant man. Consider the implications of trolling for fragments of humanity in this queered illustration: we are limited in our understanding of another’s meaning making because we keep fragments of our identity in other worlds, often in cyberspace, hidden from view. As Norm Friesen writes: “the life world that the computer presents has its own, manifold, experiential times and spaces,”<sup>56</sup> and “he himself is the one who structures his surroundings, after all.”<sup>57</sup>

A queer perspective illustrates how virtual spaces harbor particular manifestations of identity that don’t fit in normative discursive spaces. Join

me in *trolling* these hidden worlds in order to enrich our encounters with others in the public world, because if something of our identity and understanding is hidden in private spaces, it is worthwhile to examine evidences of these private spaces in order to enrich our public dialogue around social justice.

### QUEERS, TROLLS, AND THE INTERCORPOREAL

I use trolling as a linguistic bridge to link the queer experience of trolling for sex with the contemporary usage of the word that refers to online users trolling discussion boards and chat rooms with offensive content that would likely not be used in civil face to face discourse.<sup>8</sup> Imagine a person alone in their self-structured surrounding where a screen allows them perceived freedom to express themselves without regard for conventions of normative, or indeed even civil, discourse. Lacking in this scenario is an *intercorporeal* connection with others; intercorporeality is defined by Marjorie O’Loughlin in *Embodiment and Education* as a “carnal bond between human subjects, indicating that embodied subjects are connected in their belonging to a common world.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than suggesting a common bond is present in online spaces, I argue the lack of intercorporeality in the act of internet trolling is what makes these thoughts salient – they are the result of private thought devoid of an encounter with the corporeal *other*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests in *The Visible and the Invisible* that intercorporeality outlines two connected spheres, the sphere of physical living and the sphere of empathy.<sup>10</sup> Withdrawing from empathy toward others in order to express often malicious and normatively inappropriate comments mirrors the tradition of trolling for queer sexual encounters insofar as they are both, at least in perception, rejected by a normative society that does not want to deal with the fact of their existence. My approach of connecting these ideas is queer because Queer Theory often utilizes “techniques to make sense of and remark upon what it dismisses or cannot bear to know.”<sup>11</sup> When one reads a particularly inflammatory trolling comment online, a sort of queer moment occurs, “when the world no longer seems the right way up ... [and] the effect is ‘wonky.’”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps you have read a comment in a discussion forum and thought to yourself “who could possibly write such a thing, let alone actually believe it?” Indeed, in an online post about a “privilege board” installed on my university campus, a commenter suggested that: “The white male students need to start wearing masks and doing a little push back.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than just dismissing such comments as disingenuous or sociopathic, refer back to the example of the businessman on Grindr and realize that both of these examples illustrate a very real piece of human identity that is not apparent in public spaces governed by normative rules of discourse.

With this juxtaposition of public and private identity in mind I posit a novel approach: this kind of discourse might provide a glimpse into the private self-structured surroundings that exist just below the surface of normative discourse. These online artifacts might serve as fragments of how some genuinely approach issues of social justice. There might be a realness<sup>14</sup> in these fragments, and if so there might also be pedagogical application. Well-chosen comments, therefore, might be usable texts within class discussions of social justice themes and, further, these artifacts of online trolling might be used to troll classroom spaces to probe more deeply into what our students might really be thinking about critical perspectives on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, pedagogical use of trolling comments might actually serve to create learning experiences that disrupt students’ current understandings of social justice.

With this in mind, I argue that while acknowledging that intercorporeality allows for empathy, face to face dialogue can often be disingenuous. From an exploration of the interconnectedness of queering and trolling, I hope to glean from the carnage of online trolling that cyber artifacts can become queer incursions that provide powerful pedagogical interruptions in intercorporeal classroom spaces.

### OBVIOUS TROLL IS OBVIOUS: QUEER TROLLS TO CYBER TROLLS

In 1950s England, one might well stroll through a park and hear a man

say to another “the butch omme ajax who, if we fluttered our ogle riahhs at him sweetly, might just troll over.” The Polari-English translation is: “the butch man nearby who, if we fluttered our eyelashes at him sweetly, might just wander over.”<sup>15</sup> If nobody understands the exchange, the two men can continue to speak openly about their queerness without fear of recourse from authorities. Sara Ahmed suggests that private space for queer dialogue is needed because “the queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, queer spaces develop under the radar of intercorporeality, because our physical actions and words can belie actual thoughts in public encounters.<sup>17</sup>

Two salient features emerge: first, we cannot know what another is thinking, and second, because we cannot know this, we use information from the body to fill in the narrative about the interaction.<sup>18</sup> Referring back to the Polari encounter above, we see a clear limitation: the gestures and words used are coded in precisely such a way as to obfuscate understanding. We would have to familiarize ourselves with the language of trolling in order to enrich our meaning making of the encounter. Trolling for sex in queer communities, then, often relied on false intercorporeal impressions to hide their intentions from a disapproving world. Referring back to the fictional example of the businessman and Grindr, in his dress and bearing he uses signifiers of heteronormativity to hide his actions, while trolling in a distinct world just under the surface of the normative world; it is as if a queer discursive space develops in the cracks of a constructed world that denies this voice, and the apparent shared corporeal reality is juxtaposed with a new shared reality of the psyche, manifesting itself in spaces of coded language, behaviors, and of course, online spaces. To develop meaning as an outside observer would require exploration in order to crack this code.

Re-contextualizing this concept in the normative space of contemporary discourse, in a society claiming to embrace norms of respectful dialogue, queer thoughts and actions might be framed differently. Imagine the person who has to deal with what they perceive as *politically correct* culture in the public sphere and thus retreats to the cyber world to express their thinking. Brack-

eting out for a moment the overtones of *politically correct*, at play here is a new normativity that regulates public discourse to the point that individuals who dissent feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings publically. This phenomenon leads to the development of discursive spaces that mirror that of the queer experience, but in this instance, the trolling is not for sex, but for the articulation of a dissenting opinion that is denied to them within normative public discourse. In this sense we can easily see how:

online discussion forums provide a new arena for the enactment of power inequities such as those motivated by sexism, racism, and heterosexism. The relative anonymity of the Internet releases some of the inhibitions of a civil society, resulting in flaming, harassment, and hate speech online<sup>19</sup>

Now we can contextualize online spaces as queer or perhaps as producing queer incursions into straight spaces, in much the same way that historical queer trolling has done for decades. Though clearly the queer community is responding to oppressive heteronormativity and the online trolling community is responding to a *perceived* suppression of their privileged hate speech, the end result is the same – a retreat into online spaces to articulate their position. Precisely for this reason, both examples might be thought of as “queer.” The double meaning of queer here might seem at first confusing, until queer is understood as both a noun or state of being in terms of identity, and as an adjective describing a phenomenon of making blurry that which was once clear. As Deborah Britzman points out: “Queer Theory does not depend on the identity of the theorist ... rather ... Queer Theory anticipates the precariousness of the signified: the limits within its conventions and rules, and the ways in which these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations, and inconveniences.”<sup>20</sup> Returning to our cyberspace troll, we note that their performance in public [read normative] spaces might have a particular signification, but the signification might not provide a full picture of what the individual really thinks.

Returning to intercorporeality with these above examples in mind, a queer disconnect forms. Merleau-Ponty suggests that consciousness is observable through our comportment in the world, and it is in “the manner

in which the other deals with the world, that I will be able to discover [their] consciousness.”<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty is suggesting that an intercorporeal encounter with the other is predicated on my ability to empathize with the body of the other; to see a smile and understand it because I smile when I am happy.<sup>22</sup> The potential fallacy here is that I can discover consciousness through conduct; if the history of gay trolling tells us anything, it is that aspects of consciousness are often obfuscated from view in normative spaces where these aspects are deemed inappropriate or unappreciated. So to posit, in the words of Susan Herring, “internet trolling as a manifestation of a much broader phenomenon whereby individuals take pleasure in disrupting the social order out of anger, perversity or contempt”<sup>23</sup> might not necessarily be true.

Internet trolling might then be a phenomenon of hiding aspects of consciousness because these aspects are not seen as acceptable in public spaces. Confronted with an intercorporeal encounter with the other, I might not give voice to what I am truly thinking, and this manifests itself in the only outlet that I have available for my aggression: online spaces. Herring goes on to suggest an important idea that will drive my further inquiry: “It would be interesting to compare online disruption with disruptive behavior in face-to-face groups in playgrounds, classes, meetings, support groups, and social events.”<sup>24</sup> Now, rather than a correlation, there is in fact a disconnect between online activity and face to face encounters in public spaces, or in Merleau-Ponty’s language, a disconnect between the “perceptual fields that can be given in his experience ... and his relations with his human and social surroundings.”<sup>25</sup> Applying this disconnect to pedagogy, I now turn to specific examples of trolling on my own university campus to more clearly illustrate the disconnect between personal perception and social relationships.

### TROLL IN CAMPUS: THE POLITICAL BECOMES PERSONAL

Conversations about power and privilege have become common at my and many other institutions of higher education across the country in recent years. While occasionally in my classes I encounter what Merleau-Ponty calls

“psychological rigidity,” or the inability to see beyond a clearly delineated sense of black and white truth,<sup>26</sup> generally there is a sense of mutual respect or at least civility. The reason for general civility in face to face interactions might connect to intercorporeality, or transferring the intimate experience of one’s own body to that of an “other.”<sup>27</sup> I can see a flushed face, hear shaking in a voice, and generally sense angry muscles tensing in someone that I am talking to. In this sensory experience I connect these significations to my own body, and therefore develop a sense of empathy; if not empathy to ideas, then at least empathy to individuals manifesting in surface politeness.

And yet, when attending to cyberspace there are at least some students (maybe even my own, though it is precisely my lack of knowing that becomes problematic) who have rather angry and dissenting opinions that they are willing to articulate in very aggressive ways. The conservative website [www.campus-reform.com](http://www.campus-reform.com) points out significant social media reaction to a *privilege board* that was posted on my university campus, citing comments from students such as, “If you can express your political opinions without being called racist, sexist, bigot, etc. you have liberal privilege.”<sup>28</sup> Further, the comments under the article teemed with angry posts, some claiming to be authored by university students, and some not. One comment declares, “white Christian males ... founded and made this country great,” while another commenter suggests that it is their “privilege to work 40 hours a week to pay for [the university’s] girly men.”<sup>29</sup>

Why does the vitriol of anonymous internet trolls matter? Queer phenomenologist Sara Ahmed provides language to put these comments into context by suggesting that we consider our orientation to phenomena.<sup>30</sup> In an academic context, if I want to consider how students are engaging with issues of social justice, I will likely draw on a rather narrow set of evidences, including classroom dialogue and student assessment and reflection. Because of the limitations of these evidences, I really cannot know if these very students are retreating into the cyber world and articulating very different points of view. Reorienting our thinking, imagine taking seriously online comments as “moments of disorientation, which involve not only “the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our

own contingency and the horror with which it fills us.”<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps we are so quick to dismiss online trolling because it does horrify, and with good reason. With comments calling universities a “four year rape apology seminar” and professors “lesbianic femenists” (sic), it is easy to first react with anger and then almost instant dismissal, and yet what happens when the trolling hits closer to home, and transitions from cyberspace space to physical space?<sup>32</sup> Shortly after the privilege board scenario, a group of students literally trolled the streets, using chalk to post messages over the walls and walkways of the campus with slogans such as, “white privilege is a lie.”<sup>33</sup> When a group of students reacted against the “chalkings,” wiping them away, people once again took to social media to troll the situation with comments including, “I’m actually concerned with how *butthurt* (sic) these students are getting.”<sup>34</sup>

In civil public discourse we don’t refer to people being genuinely offended as *butthurt*, but this speaks to the sense that online spaces provide the opportunity to say cruel things without having to see the faces of the targets of the cruelty. When uttering a cruel remark to the face of another person I can see signifiers such as flushed faces, teary eyes, physical recoiling, and aggressive posturing begin to arise. These signifiers become together a totality of expressions presented to me, and as I decode them “I witness, I project, so to speak, what I myself feel of my own body ... I transfer to the other the intimate experience I have of my own body.”<sup>35</sup> While certainly not everyone will decode and project in the same ways, these projections of bodily understanding can prevent us from saying the hurtful things that we might feel in face to face public encounters, and instead retreat to the anonymity of the internet perhaps not so that the “other” doesn’t see them, but so that they don’t have to see the “other.”

#### TROLL AS THE STRAW PERSON: IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM SPACES

Re-contextualizing, consider the normative space that exists in a university classroom. There are norms of civil discourse and, particularly when

faced with critical conversations of social justice centering on race, class, gender, and sexuality, “artful facilitation is imperative in order to effectively manage the content, conflict, and emotions that invariably arise in any meaningful classroom engagements.”<sup>36</sup> This facilitation of dialogue allows for interruptions and encounters with difference, but as noted, there might be a limitation to what we can genuinely learn about each other in face to face discourse. Cyber-trolling artifacts might serve to provide an important secondary facet to the understanding of a person’s consciousness: the part kept hidden in normative spaces. If, as some of the trolling comments are to be believed, students might feel “intimidated by liberal professors,”<sup>37</sup> the cyber world might provide examples of how some students respond to divisive issues of social justice without students having to disclose in discussion. Given the intercorporeal space of the physical classroom, imagine being able to critically interrogate a controversial or dissenting opinion without a student having to risk a sense of safety by voicing this opinion. Further, consider the opportunity for self-reflection and interrupted thinking without the student fearing judgement.<sup>38</sup>

Why might there be a radical disconnect between what a student says in class versus their articulation of thought in cyber spaces? Through the lens of intercorporeality it becomes clear that we are bound by space and place in terms of both meaning making and expression of thought: “the specificities of place and all environments have body-subjects who are at different times, in differing cultures, related to them.”<sup>39</sup> As the body subject relates to space and place differently as these variables move, we might begin to think of the constitution of consciousness variable based on space and place, or that in fact we ARE different people in front of a screen than face to face: “the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated.”<sup>40</sup> Further, Butler notes, “there is no ‘I’ who stands behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse,”<sup>41</sup> meaning in this context that in a social justice classroom conversation, the intercorporeal moment might constitute a consciousness different from that of the same person sitting in front of a screen with only their thoughts and the surroundings of their room to constitute their consciousness.

Might there be value to interacting with the kinds of ideas that students would not utter in class? At this point it should be made clear that I am not suggesting a professor stalk the Facebook feeds of their students, quite the contrary. An anonymous representation of tacit student thinking can be presented through simply setting up trolling comments as a “straw person” for continued interrogation, and in Norm Friesen’s words, “when compared to their counterparts in the ‘real’ world, virtual artifacts manifest a pliability, brilliance, discontinuity, and disposability that can have educational value.”<sup>42</sup> It is this disposability that makes a trolling comment useful: students are not required to interrogate personalized values, rather ideas that some might have encountered. Rich understanding might be attained by challenging the hateful online trolling as text to be critically considered, extending “beyond its physical limitations through its engagement with other figurative bodies, such as the ‘body’ of the text ... an ‘enlarged view of all human being’.”<sup>43</sup> Here we might think about the background of online spaces, or what students think when they aren’t paying attention to the public or foreground: inhabiting the familiar makes things into backgrounds for action ... the background is a “dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality.”<sup>44</sup>

I wanted to arrive at empathy here at the end, I truly did. In fact, I ended my first draft by exclaiming optimistically that the phenomenon of intercorporeality creates spaces of empathy, and that the social justice pedagogue might embrace queer cyber artifacts, not as pieces of truth, but rather as authentic fragments of humanity to be used to move toward greater empathy. Things have changed since I wrote that first ending. There is a sea change in victim politics in this country and that leaves social justice discourse in a queerer state than it has been in recent years, a state that I cannot gloss over with a happy ending – the stakes are just too high.

The normative in this country has embraced what Lauren Berlant might refer to as a *cruel optimism*.<sup>45</sup> In this cruel optimism, those with power have repositioned themselves as the powerless, and have, however erroneously, taken on the mantle of the oppressed. With this in mind, those with historical privilege have developed a strange kinship with the historically marginalized Queer; they

have embraced the identity of Troll as a false sense of voice, a simpatico that allows them to project themselves into cyberspace with a sense of liberation, a cruel optimism that they are fighting against forces of oppression.

This “condition of projected possibility” in fact “creates a fake moment of intersubjectivity.”<sup>46</sup> In Berlant’s words, those historically with power have developed a “rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others.”<sup>47</sup> With this in mind, the project seems different to me, and the project seems now to require the pedagogue to perhaps use trolling artifacts to displace this cruel optimism, to reclaim Queer for the marginal, for the wonky, for the skewed, for the misfits ... in short, those who claim to be opposed to the Queer ought to be confronted with the cyber evidences of their own attempt at queering.

1 Portions of this Yearbook article have been published as: Matthew Thomas-Reid, “Queering text: Literacies surrounding cyber trolling,” in *Negotiating Place and Space through Digital Literacies: Research and Practice*, eds., Damiana Pyles and Ryan Rish (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2019).

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4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed., James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 17.

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7 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 108.

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16 Ahmed, “Orientations,” 554.

17 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 114.

18 Ibid., 114.

19 Herring et al., “Searching for Safety Online,” 371.

20 Britzman, “Is there a Queer Pedagogy?,” 153.

21 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 117.

22 Ibid., 117.

23 Herring et al., “Searching for Safety Online,” 382.

24 Ibid., 371.

25 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 108.

26 Ibid., 101.

27 Ibid., 115.

28 Hutchison, “‘Privilege board’.”

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- 30 Ahmed, "Orientations," 545.
- 31 Ibid., 544.
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- 35 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 115.
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- 43 Ibid., 95.
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- 46 Berlant, "Cruel Optimism," 22.
- 47 Ibid.