

Commentary

The problem is not anonymity, but genocide; Reply to Babish's "Response to the AnonymOT Collective"

THE ANONYMOT COLLECTIVE

Babish's response to our commentary, *Occupational Therapists Speaking for Justice and Human Rights: From Complicit Silencing to Collective Resistance* (AnonymOT Collective, 2024), contests the anonymity chosen by its authors, and contends that there is a paradox in anonymity in the context of justice. A "paradox" is something that appears self-contradictory but that may hold deeper truth. While appearing contradictory, the fact that anonymity can be used to serve justice could thus hold a certain truth.

We share Babish's commitment to the principle of "nothing about us without us" as a vital stance in any struggle against oppression, particularly in the context of the ongoing literal and symbolic erasure of Palestine and Palestinians. However,

Babish makes several assumptions about the AnonymOT Collective without engaging with the message itself.

Our intentions in responding to Babish are to assert that justice can be advanced without always centring one's own identity, to assert our belief in the value of a diversity of tactics in the fight against oppression and injustice, and to affirm our commitment to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people and with others who are similarly committed. Thus, we explicitly stand with Babish and their community in our intention – even if we may disagree on elements of praxis. We hope our reply is seen as complementary to, and supportive of his call to amplify the voices of Palestinians.

The problem is not anonymity, it is genocide

First, we address Babish's central concern: that the authors failed to "incorporate the voices and experiences of Palestinian occupational therapists" and that our choice to remain anonymous suggests a shared privilege of detachment. This contention overlooks the obvious alternative: that these voices and experiences were in fact present (despite their

anonymity) and that if detachment was possible there would have been no risk to being named.

While Babish appears to view the choice to remain anonymous as a strategy to protect the status and privilege that a few within our Collective enjoy, we argue the opposite. In reality, the authors of the Commentary gained nothing from this publication. In the healthcare professions, authors accumulate social capital for every publication they achieve; thus, the authors who worked together over countless hours to both write the Commentary and find a willing venue for academic publication, have forfeited the public recognition this paper would ordinarily have provided. Those with privilege and lower risk of reprisals among our Collective chose to remain anonymous in solidarity with, and to protect their more marginalized colleagues already targeted for their social identities. As a Collective, we were in complete agreement that our Commentary ought to centre its message rather than being a platform for showcasing its authors, and that speaking against genocide did not require the perceived legitimacy of names, positions or titles. We had hoped that by omitting our names, our detractors would focus solely on our message.

Babish claims to have the “right” to be told the identities of the AnonymOT Collective. He does not. We reject the assertion that any reader possesses a fundamental “right” to tell others when they ought to out themselves or expose themselves to harm; and whether their perceptions of the risks they confront are legitimate. One would be ill-advised to assume that the risks faced by our Collective were minimal or absent, and that some of us had not, already, been targeted for employment sanctions, online hate and threats. We do not compare the risks we take to those faced by Palestinians under occupation, yet it still remains that our stance vis-à-vis our own risk-assessment is non-negotiable. Just as “cultural safety” can only be assessed by the recipient of care (and not by health-care providers; Gray & McPherson, 2005), we assert our own right, as authors, to determine when we are in a position to assume the risks related to certain actions while maintaining our capacity to continue our activism and care for our communities. In the face of tyranny, “we are free only insofar as we exercise control over what people know about us, and in what circumstances they come to know it” (Snyder, 2017, p.88).

Babish contends that anonymity “denies readers the ability to evaluate the authors’ lived experiences, professional backgrounds, and personal stakes in the issues discussed”. It does not. Our paper asserted the simple aim “to add our voices to those healthcare professionals who are speaking against genocide, including those working in healthcare in Gaza”. As a collective of occupational therapists, we believe that most readers of the Commentary will have been able to

discern our professional and personal stakes in ending our profession’s silence; and our inherent right – and obligation – as occupational therapists, to speak up.

We uphold the imperative, for all those seeking to end injustice, to stand together and support each other. The requirement that every name be systematically made public, rather than fostering collective agency over the practice of mitigation of harm and so-called collateral damage, would have countered the solidarity we cherish; as would the exclusion of those who are most at-risk for lack of better protection. Solidarity is made possible through collective action; and fighting from within is a *strategy*. Moreover, oppression is sustained when the oppressed are divided and fight against one another. And once students have lost their university places, clinicians and academics have lost their jobs, and those wielding power over the silence remain in place, the status quo prevails.

Anonymity’s long history in advancing justice

Anonymous writing is a form of communication frequently used to advance justice. Historically, anonymity has been used strategically to bring attention to the wrongdoings of organizations when officially sanctioned means of protest have been attempted (and exhausted). Anonymous groups of intellectuals and activists such as The Invisible Press in apartheid South Africa, or The Invisible Committee, contributed to resistance literature by arguing for a global uprising against capitalist and colonial structures of power.

Even a cursory search of the literature reveals that anonymity is frequently employed by authors with lived experience in various situations of oppression, using their personal experiences to advance justice by exposing the wrongdoings of those in power. For example, a PubMed search reveals that the pseudonym “Anonymous” has been used over 100 times and in some of the most prestigious journals, giving a voice to patients’ experience of violence in healthcare settings, for example, and to whistleblowers witnessing unethical situations. Similarly, our Commentary cited Salam (2024), a Palestinian who chose to publish under an anonymous pseudonym to protect their identity and focus attention on the message: that “there is no way to leave Gaza”. Their anonymity did not diminish the power of their message; we sincerely hope that Salam is still alive and uninjured.

While Babish argues that anonymity precludes transparency and accountability, we argue that transparency, accountability, and anonymity are not mutually exclusive. Our article was peer reviewed, and even underwent legal consultation, being thereby exposed to the scrutiny of our peers (whose critiques were incorporated into our revised manuscript). And once published, we remain accountable, as demonstrated by this

detailed response to our critic. Accountability is not a matter of identity. The idea of being accountable while being anonymous is paradoxical but not impossible.

Babish advances the obvious contention: that “advocacy for justice is not a theoretical exercise; it is a practice rooted in courage, accountability, and solidarity”. We agree; the process of writing as a large collective with a diversity of lived engagements, undertaking the revisions suggested during the peer review process, and publishing the paper was never a theoretical exercise. The practicality of organizing such a collective, in a context where silence, isolation, and close surveillance prevailed, had to be done skillfully to maintain dialogue without further increasing the risks. This process demanded *courage* to trust and fully engage with each other, to be *accountable* to each other, and to stand in *solidarity* with those of our Collective most immediately impacted by the actions of the Israeli government and ongoing ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

The problem of “speaking for others”

Babish is not the first in academia to identify the consequential “problem of speaking for others” (Alcoff, 1991). Clearly, the inherent problem of anonymous publishing is the inevitable (and often erroneous) assumption made about the identity/ies of the author/s. Thus, Babish refers to “my” people, seemingly assuming both a unitary experience of Palestinians in the occupied territories and enforced diaspora, and that Palestinians might not also be “our” people as members of the Collective. We were aware, of course, that we might be criticized for our decision to assert and support the inherent right of Palestinian occupational therapists (and their allies) to choose for themselves which risks they do and do not wish to take or to prioritize in the current moment; including their right to protect their own names. We are genuinely pleased that Babish is surrounded by an environment that makes him able to engage in “work and advocacy”, “navigate systemic oppression and risks” while standing “by [his] name and identity”. Regrettably, anti-Palestinian racism is rife in many western countries, including Canada (Arab Canadian Lawyers Association, 2022), and the complexities arising from those positioned differently from Babish may compel them to make different choices. Our Collective respected their rights in this matter, just as we respect Babish’s courage in standing by his own name and identity.

Although Babish affirms his “responsibility” to amplify the voices of all occupational therapists and healthcare workers in Gaza and the West Bank, we are unable to discern how this was done in his paper. Indeed, we respectfully ask: in his paper, where *are* the voices of those Babish claims the responsibility

to represent? However, just as ending racism is not solely the responsibility of racialized people, our collective believes that, while avoiding saviourism, advocating against the genocide of Palestinians should not rest solely on Palestinians.

Our demand for institutional accountability

Babish contends that those who claim to speak for justice must embody the courage, accountability and solidarity they demand from others. This assertion suggests that members of our Collective could not embody such qualities simply because of anonymity. This also reveals that the paper is not being judged on its merits, but rather, that moral judgements are being made based on assumptions about who the Collective is composed of, and the presumed identities of its 60+ members (the numbers of which have kept growing since the paper’s publication).

We respectfully refer Babish to our paper, which carefully ensured that we do *not* call for individual therapists to be held accountable for the inaction of their professional bodies but rather demanded institutional accountability from occupational therapy’s professional organizations. Our Commentary specifically cites the proclamations of the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and of the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) and demands that these public statements be documents of action rather than performance. Nowhere in our paper do we place the responsibility for ending the silence on individual occupational therapists and students. This would have been profoundly irresponsible; and in the absence of support from their profession, would have compounded the harm that has already accrued to those occupational therapists and students who have sought to take a public stand against the genocide.

For us as a collective, the decision to remain anonymous was justified by the idea that we must always fight collectively against oppression (instead of attacking our allies whose choices and tactics may differ from our own). We are collectively accountable: we do not shirk criticism, and we engage with others who challenge our message. It is obviously true that we cannot be held individually accountable. But this has no relevance in light of our commitment to collective accountability and our demand for institutional accountability. Moreover, oppression will not be overturned by individual action.

On moral superiority

Babish claims that “advocacy is not a position of moral superiority, but a practice of accountability and solidarity”, without providing evidence for which aspects of our Commentary triggered this statement. Claiming moral superiority requires that one judge the morality of others and

establish one's own morality as superior. Our Commentary centered neither ourselves nor our morality (part of the problem raised by Babish is that the paper was not enough about us). Rather, it referred to our professional bodies' self-proclaimed assertions of morality and challenged them to remain consistent by enacting what they say they should enact. Demonstrating the incoherences of these bodies does not correspond to claiming moral superiority as that would have involved that we state our own morality and argue for this morality to be superior.

However, we agree that advocacy does have something to do with morality. In advocacy, our intention is necessarily to make things better, to improve a current, problematic situation. One tangible way of enacting the "good" for us in a situation where much is out of the control of individuals, meant demanding that, collectively, our governing bodies reflect our ethical standards as health professionals in promoting justice and speaking up in the face of human rights violations. In this sense, advocacy remains a moral discourse.

Finding excuses for the silence

Babish asserts that our discussion concerning the WFOT should have provided a robust analysis of the structural and systemic factors that enable professional complicity with genocide; that we failed to consider "the complexities of international advocacy within highly politicised contexts. Critiquing silence is necessary, but a clear understanding of the barriers and opportunities for action within professional organisations must accompany it". This raises two issues.

First, we did not – and do not – believe it to be our obligation to provide excuses for the complicit silence and absence of ethical action on the part of our professional bodies. Yes; there are (always) barriers to action. But we must not forget that occupational therapists and the public have been assured that "since its inception in 1952, WFOT has advocated for human rights. It always will" (WFOT, 2020). "Always", they wrote in 2020. What excuse can be given for their current failure to speak up? If and when CAOT and WFOT decide to end their silence, it is surely up to them to explain their apparent difficulties in speaking up for the human rights of their Palestinian members and of the Palestinian people during the genocide. Not us.

Second, we respectfully suggest that Babish has failed to consider how "the complexities of international advocacy within highly politicized contexts" informed our own decision to remain anonymous. Thus we agree with Babish that "Critiquing silence is necessary, but a clear understanding of the barriers and opportunities for action ... must accompany it". Babish has advanced a robust criticism of the silence we have maintained

surrounding our names but has not demonstrated an understanding of the barriers and (constrained) opportunities for action that might have framed our decision to write anonymously.

Babish notes that "The authors' call for governing bodies to break their silence is important, but it must be matched with concrete strategies for achieving this goal. What specific actions should WFOT and other organizations take?". Again, we respectfully refer him to the last section of our Commentary, where we outlined concrete strategies for occupational therapy's governing bodies to begin actions in accordance with their own ethical principles.

Support for the assertions within the Commentary

Babish asserts that "The authors' framing of the crisis relies heavily on generalizations and selective evidence". This is an astonishing assertion considering that our Commentary contained fully five, double-columned pages of references. These included 15 publications in leading medical journals (including BMJ, JAMA and the Lancet) penned by medical personnel working in Gaza, four scholarly papers addressing the genocide in Gaza, many publications from Amnesty International, the Human Rights Council, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, Al Jazeera, the Guardian and New York Times, two reports from the International Court of Justice, three from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and several reports from the United Nations.

Crimes against Palestinians have atrociously – yet unsurprisingly – continued following the presumed ceasefire of January 19, 2025. Much more work is needed to analyze the historical implications of this complicity, and this demonstration should draw from various disciplinary and experiential perspectives. This was beyond the intended scope of our paper-as-political-action. In this time-sensitive context, our decision was to limit the scope of our paper to providing a brief overview of the current amplification of a genocide, and making the link to the complicity upheld by the silence in our profession. As a Collective, we wholeheartedly welcome additional contributions that align with the aims advanced by Babish and hope that WFOT will invest the necessary resources to ensure their global dissemination.

Social media

Babish challenges our use of social media platforms, claiming that "the authors' engagement with these platforms raises questions about their objectives and accountability". Aware of the reality that "advocacy on social media is not without its pitfalls, including the risk of performative allyship and the

commodification of suffering” (Babish, 2025), as well as the inherent lack of accountability – pitfalls that are displayed across occupational therapy’s social media platforms – we chose instead to publish our thoughts in *Aporia*: a forum that demanded peer review and intellectual accountability. As stated in our paper, this choice of platform – in this case an academic journal – was intended to complement social media and other grassroots initiatives to (1) penetrate a different anticipated audience; one often not reached through social media with its tendency to devolve into “echo-chambers”; and (2) add to the advocacy toolbox by making the link specifically to occupational therapy. This choice was justified especially in light of – as outlined in the paper – the silence with which occupational therapy organizations had so far responded to the multiple advocacy letters diffused via GoogleDocs or social media. We will perhaps also note that publication in an academic journal was not an easy feat and highlight that it was not an occupational therapy journal that accepted our paper.

Conclusion

We welcomed Babish’s paper and the opportunity it has given us to assert, again, that the importance of our Commentary lies not in its authorship, but in its message: That occupational therapists are obligated to use their collective voice to demand that their profession’s governing bodies manifest the same ethical standards and respect for human rights that they require of their individual members. We are glad that our paper has generated dialogue in our professional community. For example, the paper was shared by the CAOT in its weekly newsletter on November 21, 2024. In introducing the paper, the CAOT finally recognized what is happening as a “genocide” in front of all its members. In that sense, our paper broke the silence, thus achieving one of its aims. For some of those who were censored or who have been harmed by the silence in the profession, our Commentary was received as a reflection of their own ethics, and a sense of recognition and harmony with their own understanding of their profession’s role. Like any action taken in this case, publishing an academic paper should never be conceived as an end in-itself or even as the most effective action. It was a modest contribution, just one action, that our collective engaged in alongside other ongoing actions, tactics and strategies.

If our goal within our respective spheres of influence is to end the genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Pappe, 2007), we must agree that there is no single way of doing advocacy and activism, of resisting and pushing back against harm: we must each act in accordance with our values, our positions and our abilities. We close by citing Palestinian

psychiatrist Samah Jabr – a figure of the Palestinian liberation struggle – who recently wrote: “When a struggle begins to revolve around ideological gatekeeping rather than collective emancipation, it weakens from within. It is no accident that colonial regimes rely on the tactic of fragmentation.” (2025). She added: “The road to freedom is not paved with denunciations but with dialogue among the oppressed.” So, when Babish asks “How can occupational therapists collectively hold [our governing] bodies accountable?”, we respond: by acting collectively as Palestinians, as well as with those who share our deep concern for the people of Palestine, finding strength in the diversity of all our positionalities and strategies.

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At the time of publishing, the AnonymOT Collective was composed of 60+ occupational therapists, students, and faculty members from different countries and continents. Those interested in pursuing a critical dialogue and exchange can join the Collective by using the following corresponding address:

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