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#wegotthis

queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia

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Published in:
Culture and Organization

DOI:
[10.1080/14759551.2022.2047679](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2047679)

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Just, S. N., & du Plessis, E. M. (2022). #wegotthis: queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia. *Culture and Organization*, 28(5), 412-428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2047679>

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#wegotthis: Queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia

Abstract

Queer parrhesia is an activist mode of speaking truth to power that destabilizes dominant societal positions *and* their opposition. We develop this concept and illustrate one of its registers, parodic paranoia, through a close reading of the whistleblower and transactivist Chelsea Manning's bid to run for U.S. Senate in the 2018 Democratic primaries. Hacktivism and transactivism, we show, constitute rhetorical manoeuvres by which Manning performs (as) a subject position that combines an ethics of paranoia with an aesthetics of parody to enact politics as unusual. Beginning from Manning's parodic paranoia, we conceptualize queer parrhesia as an inherently transgressive political style and discuss its performative potential for dismantling current social orders and imagining less orderly alternatives. The productive potential of queer parrhesia, we conclude, can only be realized when the subject position of the parrhesiastes is put at risk, gaining strength from its performative vulnerability and, indeed, failure.

Keywords

Chelsea Manning, paranoia, parody, parrhesia, queer activism

Few first-time bids to run for US senate for the Democrats in Maryland have received as much attention as that of Chelsea Manning. In January 2018 'the transgender former Army private who was convicted of passing sensitive government documents to WikiLeaks' (Jouvenal and Portnoy 2018) filed the necessary paperwork to participate in the Democratic primaries. Manning's announcement was covered massively in traditional news media and spread widely on digital platforms – and with good reason, one might argue. Already hailed as 'one of the most talked about

people on the planet’ (Heller 2017), Manning added her own voice to the conversation after being released from prison – and the candidature sharpens the political edge of her already contested public persona.

Having served seven years of a 35-year sentence, Chelsea Manning’s punishment was commuted to years-served in one of Barack Obama’s final acts as US president (Savage 2017). On May 17, 2017, therefore, Manning was able to put on a pristine pair of black Converse and announce her ‘first steps of freedom’ (Manning 2017a) to the followers of her Twitter account, which was established in 2015 and has the handle of @xychelsea (Pilkington 2015). From then on, momentum built around her public persona. For instance, Manning was featured in *The New York Times* in June 2017 (Shaer 2017), in August she was on the cover of *Vogue* (Heller 2017), and in November she was celebrated by the LGBTQ+ community as ‘Newsmaker of the year’ (Hicklin 2017).

Chelsea Manning’s past and present actions, however, have made her as many enemies as they have allies, and the character of her interactions with friends and foes alike tends to add pressure to her already precarious situation (Pilkington 2018a, Shaer 2017). While she did not win the primary election,¹ Chelsea Manning continues her personal investment in public life (and strife). In March 2019, her activism led to another bout in prison, as she refused to cooperate with a grand jury investigation of WikiLeaks (Fortin 2019; Statt 2019). Manning was released in March 2020 (Pengelly 2020; Savage 2020), and she is currently building a professional career as a security consultant (as stated in her Twitter bio; see also del Castillo 2021) while continuing to share political views and personal information with her 400,500 followers on Twitter (as of October 2021).

¹ The result was a resounding victory for incumbent senator Ben Cardin, who went on to re-win his seat in the mid-term elections of Fall 2018 (Kheel 2018; Madani 2018).

This paper begins from an observation of two ‘duelling narratives’ in media coverage of Manning’s person and politics: ‘One had Manning, in the words of [then] President Donald Trump, as an “ungrateful traitor”. The other positioned her as transgender icon and champion of transparency – a “secular martyr”...’ (Shaer 2017).² These narratives emerged when Manning was serving her first term in prison – ‘absent her own voice’ as *The New York Times* puts it in one of the earliest interviews with Manning to be published after she was released (Shaer 2017). Our analytical focus is on Chelsea Manning’s subsequent use of and work with these narratives: how does she position herself in relation to existing discursive representations? Does she use them actively in establishing and strengthening her own platform for speaking and acting up? And/or does she alter them in the process?

Seeking answers to these questions, we turn to Chelsea Manning’s electoral campaign, beginning with the announcement video (Manning 2018a), in which Manning presents her candidature to the Democratic electorate of Maryland, and moving on to the development and articulation of her political platform on Twitter, for which we work with a corpus of tweets from the six-month campaign period (January-June 2018). Our first encounters with these texts alerted us to what we might term their countercultural ‘ethical-aesthetics’ (for more on this term and its critical implications, see Weiskopf 2014 and below). In the video, an urban environment of protest in various forms – from graffiti to rioting – features prominently, just as Manning’s voice-over narrative is reminiscent of statements issued by the likes of hacktivist collective Anonymous (for more on the communicative organizationality of Anonymous, see Dobusch and Schoeneborn 2015).

² The quote’s use of the label ‘secular martyr’, we believe, dramatizes Manning’s willingness to suffer for her principles and beliefs – as well as her followers’ celebration of this willingness. To emphasize Manning’s continued activism and her refusal to accept fate passively, however, ‘human rights champion’ might be a more accurate label (see Munro 2018).

The tone is aggressively antagonistic, and the content is pure opposition to the powers that be with no room for compromise, but also no indication of possible alternatives. On Twitter, however, the hashtag #wegotthis recurs as does the statement ‘we have more power than they do’, adding a more hopeful note to the antagonistic style. Further, we find that on her social medium of choice Manning is more playful and engaging, as her tweets are characterized by an elaborate use of emojis and other markers of internet culture, generally, as well as Twitter lingoism, more particularly. Here, Manning’s adversarial style, her willingness to face the powers that be and to address critics directly, is softened by a humorous tone and supplemented with a more caring, gentler voice.

In this paper, we investigate these and related communicative features as evidence of Chelsea Manning’s repertoire of queer parrhesia. Invoking ‘queer’ as a theoretical perspective and practical process of unsettling any and all notions of stable positionality, be they tied to individual subjects or social movements (Parker 2002, 2016; Pullen et al. 2017), we define queer parrhesia as a particular mode of ‘speaking truth to power’ that simultaneously destabilizes the positions of ‘the powers that be’ and of the ‘truth-teller’.³ Manning, we argue, persistently pushes the limits of established socio-political and communicative norms in order to enact her own precarious position and invoke an alternative community.

In existing scholarly work, such subversive performativity has been identified as a strong strategy for negotiating and contesting dominant social norms as well as for establishing positions of

³ Queer, of course, also has specific connotations to sexuality and gender, indicating an orientation to these (and other) identity dimensions, which defies binary categories and categorization (Butler 1993). We do not know whether Chelsea Manning self-identifies as queer, but her Twitter presentation as ‘trans femme’ with the pronouns ‘she/they’ does suggest a certain affinity. We should, however, emphasize that queer parrhesia, as we define it here, is by no means delimited by the material subject position of the speaker (that is, one does not have to ‘be’ queer to ‘do’ queer parrhesia).

alterity. This strategy has been related to radical politics and social activism, generally (Gibson-Graham 2008; Butler and Athanasiou 2013), and to the more specific politics of gender, race, and sexuality (Alexander 2005; Pullen and Rhodes 2012; Kuo 2018). Further, it has been argued that it finds particularly fertile ground in new forms of online activism (Harrebye 2016; Tanczer 2016; Myles 2019). Chelsea Manning's version of parrhesia, we believe, is best understood when combining these three entry points; enabled by new media affordances and enacted through rhetorical manoeuvres that endow Manning with queer agency,⁴ it is an engaging and unsettling performance of opposition to the powers that be.

More specifically, we analyse Manning's subversive style as illustrative of *parodic paranoia*, which we define as an activist communicative strategy of building one's political platform on the simultaneous creation and destabilization of a radical anti-elitist and anti-establishment position (Pilkington 2018a). We establish the conceptual framework for this analysis through a discussion of the interrelations between alterity and parrhesia that enables us to identify and explain Manning's particular transgressive style as one of playful mimicry or mocking imitation (Hariman 2008; Wieslander 2019). Manning, we argue, establishes herself as a *parrhesiastes*, one who speaks truth to power (Foucault, 2001), by combining two strands of subversive performativity. First, she builds up her position as a 'paranoid critic' (Sedgwick 2002, 123ff.; see also Žižek 1996). In so doing, she uses her whistleblower credentials (as, for instance, celebrated in Weill 2013; Žižek 2013) and the communicative strategies of the conspiracy-prone internet subculture with which she remains, albeit uneasily, associated (Lee and Currier 2018; see also Nagle 2017). Second, she invokes the creative potential of (political) parody to establish a position of 'agent provocateur' (Hariman, 2008; Kenny, 2008; Boyer, 2013). Here, Manning draws on the potentialities of her particular gendered

⁴ Here, queer agency refers to the ability to enact queerness, understood as a subject position that is defined by its refusal to be positioned. Hence, queer agency is ambiguous, unpredictable, and risky (Rand 2008).

embodiment; in performing her own trans* identity, she also enacts the potential of queer counter-publics to unsettle dominant norms (Butler 1993; Warner 2002; Halberstam 2018).⁵

While we have presented the ‘case’ of Chelsea Manning in detail here – and will continue to do so throughout – our aim is conceptual rather than empirical. Inspired by Halberstam’s (2011, 24) readings of popular culture for ‘alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor [...] mired in nihilistic critical dead ends’, we read Manning’s parodic paranoia as a performance of queer parrhesia – and use it as an opportunity to get involved with this concept and its practices.

In what follows, we first present the conceptual framework for studying queer parrhesia as performed in the register of parodic paranoia. We then move on to our methodological considerations, including a reflection on the ethics of our research as well as presentations of our data collection and analytical strategy. On this basis, we turn to close readings of Chelsea Manning’s announcement video and subsequent tweets, using the analytical involvement with Manning’s register of parodic paranoia as an occasion to conceptualize queer parrhesia. Finally, we move from the particulars of Manning’s rhetorical repertoire to a discussion of the broader potentials involved in reimagining queer parrhesia as vulnerability in resistance.

⁵ Again, we should note that we have no privileged insights as regards the underlying intentions of Chelsea Manning’s communicative acts. While the use of active verbs (‘builds’, ‘uses’, etc.) in the above may suggest as much, what we refer to, here, is not an underlying intentionality (what Manning wants her communication to do), but a communicative effect (what the communication actually does). The exclusive communicative focus of our analysis also implies that we do not know whether Manning agrees with our readings or not – we would hope so, but, as we detail below, our main ambition is conceptual development rather than empirical confirmation.

Making powerful people angry: The ethics and aesthetics of parrhesia

In recovering the classical concept of parrhesia, Foucault (2005; 2010) traces a variety of potential conceptualizations. Of these, the anti-hegemonic variant has become a particularly rich source of inspiration for (re-)conceptualizing socio-political, organizational, and/or digital activism (see inter alia Kendall and Sauter 2011; Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018; Anderson 2019, Munro 2017; Contu 2014). Here, the parrhesiastes ‘risks his [sic!] life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to [...] help other people’ (Foucault 2001, 19-20). As the parrhesiastes uses ‘fearless speech’ to address the wrongdoings of the powerful from a weak position with little or no institutional support, parrhesia becomes an act of conscience. That is, parrhesia invokes a moral demand on the individual to speak up that correlates with a broader process of becoming oneself through the practice of critique (Loacker and Muhr 2009; Weiskopf and Willmott 2013).

Within organization and management studies, parrhesia is often associated with whistleblowing, understood as one particular way of speaking up against and exposing the wrongfulness of the powers that be (Mansbach 2011; Andrade 2015; Weiskopf, Loacker and Heinrichs 2019). However, parrhesia also denotes a broader practice of resistance (Alakavuklar and Alamgir 2018), exemplified by but not limited to whistleblowing.⁶ Here, resistance may be defined, broadly, as the articulation and/or enactment of opposition in relation to sociocultural norms and/or politico-economic conditions (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). That is, as a type of oppositional activism, parrhesia is the counter-force in dynamic interrelations of power.

⁶ Similarly, whistleblower subjectivities may be more subtly entwined with and, indeed, passionately attached to the powers against which they speak than what the stereotypically masculine construct of the parrhesiastes as ‘fearless’ and ‘free’ reveals (see Agostinho and Thylstrup 2019; Kenny, Fotaki and Vandekerckhove 2020). We shall return to this point in the discussion.

Taking this radically oppositional stance, the parrhesiastes is willing and able to reveal uncomfortable and even dangerous truths, incurring and accepting the risk of ‘making powerful people angry’, as was the catchphrase on Chelsea Manning’s Twitter profile when she ran in the Maryland primaries (*SBS News* 2018). Correspondingly, the practice of parrhesia may be understood as a particular form of resistance; combining a certain ethical purview with a specific aesthetic repertoire, it enables performances of individual subjectivities that transgress the boundaries of what is commonly recognized and, hence, intelligible within a given social context (Johnston 2013; see also Butler 2004).

In what follows, we detail these two dimensions of the practice of parrhesia as the ethics of paranoia and the aesthetics of parody, respectively, and then propose tying them together as queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia. In so doing, we establish one particular interpretation of the concept of parrhesia and one specific enactment of the subject position of the parrhesiastes; we do not intend this as a replacement of other possible interpretations, but as a supplement that foregrounds those aspects, which we term queer.

Ethics of paranoia

The parrhesiastic ethics, as it is typically expressed in the figure of the oppositional truth-teller, is grounded in a cynical worldview with its concomitant position of detachment; the critique of power is articulated from a distance (Karfakis and Kokkinidis 2011). Further, the parrhesiastes assumes that power is, indeed, criticisable; the detached stance may, in this sense, be said to resemble that of Sedgwick’s (2002, 123ff) ‘paranoid critic’ who is suspicious of any and all claims to authority and seeks to unveil that which such claims gloss over (Christensen 2020). Here, ‘paranoia’ refers not to a clinical diagnosis of personality disorder, but borrows from this diagnosis to indicate the modality

of ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ – as well as the suffering involved in maintaining such constant vigilance. Parrhesia, then, is the practice of uncovering and revealing truths that the powerful would prefer to keep hidden, no matter the cost – one such cost being the parrhesiastes’ strict maintenance of social detachment in order to better scrutinize the workings of power in the organization of society.

The irony is that, when adopted as a critical stance, paranoid detachment is, as Sedgwick (2002, 141) notes, in itself a potentially powerful perspective of assumed superior knowledge. However, and herein lies the tragedy, paranoid critics must forego their own performativity; claiming to *know* everything while being able to *do* nothing.⁷ The problem is, as Žižek (1996, 142) presents it, that:

Cynical distance and full reliance on fantasy are [...] strictly codependent: today the typical subject is one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without constraint in paranoiac fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other.

Adopting the position of a ‘paranoid critic’, the parrhesiastes uncovers and articulates hidden truths about the corruption of power, but risks being locked in the act of exposing such corruption and, hence, unable to move from criticism to change. Hence, the parrhesiastes cannot put their knowledge to use; they prove that ‘even the paranoid has real enemies’ over and over again, but to no avail.

⁷ The position of the paranoid parrhesiastes, then, may be anti-performative in the sense invoked by those proponents of critical management studies who believe scholars should not engage with management (Fournier and Grey 2000; Spoelstra and Svensson 2016). The alternative position, which we will seek to develop here, is more akin to that invoked by proponents of ‘critical performativity’ who suggest that scholars can make a difference by becoming involved with the organizations they study (Spicer, Alvesson and Kjärreman 2009; Wickert and Schaefer 2015).

Despite the inertia of cynical detachment, parrhesia arguably has the potential to become a productive practice that enables the imagination – if not, indeed, establishment – of alternatives (Dey and Mason 2018; Kenny and Bushnell 2020). Karfakis and Kokkinidis (2011) link this productive potential to a certain playfulness that makes the practice of parrhesia less earnest than it seems, but, perhaps paradoxically, therefore also more likely to make a difference (see also Courpasson, Dany and Clegg 2012; Fleming and Spicer 2003). In their conceptualization of an ethics of resistance in organizations, Alakavuklar and Alamgir (2018) suggest something similar; the stone-faced cynicism of parrhesia may be tempered with irony and other deceptively humorous forms, thereby opening up prospective spaces of alterity. With these observations, we move from parrhesia's ethics of paranoia to its aesthetics of parody.

Aesthetics of parody

The parrhesiastes enacts the paranoid stance with, as Žižek (1996) notes, a certain exhilaration and, perhaps, excess. While Žižek emphasizes the pleasure taken in detached articulations of unrelenting critique, we argue that the ethics of paranoia may also enable engagement with and, ultimately, reform of the powers that be. What is at stake, here, is the aesthetics in and through which the parrhesiastes practices their particular version of oppositional truth-telling. To be sure, paranoia incurs an aesthetics of its own (Hofstadter, 2012), but in contemporary acts of parrhesia, especially as mediated by digital technologies, this aesthetics is often coupled with or plays out as parody (Lobinger et al. 2020; Wagner and Schwarzenegger 2020).

Drawing attention to the productive ambiguity of parrhesiastic expressions, Goodnight (2007) argues that the aesthetics of resistance that is invoked and enacted in and through parrhesia is

inextricably linked to flattery; the parrhesiastes may resist power by speaking up against it, but there is also an element of praise in letting powerful people know they can ‘handle the truth’. Thus, the figure of the parrhesiastes can take on carnivalesque connotations; it is a figure of opposition, but also of mockery and jest (Holm 2017). In speaking out freely and directly, seemingly without reservation or hesitation, the parrhesiastes may function as the little boy in the H. C. Andersen story who points out that the emperor has no clothes, thereby letting everyone see – and laugh at – that which was otherwise hidden in plain sight.

However, the laughter of parrhesia is not only the denuding laughter of the powerless in the face of power (Lachmann 1988); it is a more troubling form of humorous transgression. That is, in its very frankness, its direct address to power, parrhesia is parodic; mocking not only power, but also the critique of power (Boyer 2013; Hariman 2008). This does not mean that the parrhesiastes who dons the cloak of parody is never serious, but rather that they will never let themselves be held down to an unambiguous position (Boyer 2013). As Ivie (2015) argues, such ambiguity is not a unique characteristic of some practitioners of parrhesia, but a necessary condition of possibility of resistance as a source of democratic vitality; the practice of resistance must be neither pure protest nor open to consensus. Rather, resistance plays out from within the quintessentially parodic terrain of the trickster, which enables alternatives through destabilization and ambiguity (Cipriani 2019; Phelan 1996).⁸

As such, parody opens up space for ‘reparative readings’ that abandon the simple rejection of dominant positions and, instead, enable more capacious interpretations (Love 2010). However, parodic performances are not in themselves reparative, as they do not offer any easy comfort, but,

⁸ This tendency seems particularly pronounced under conditions of digital mediatization (see inter alia Guo 2018; Kirkwood, Payne and Mazer 2019; Laaksonen, Koivukosi and Porttikivi 2021).

instead, tend to enhance interpretative uncertainty. The parodic aesthetics of parrhesia, in a word, is queer (Butler 1993; Szpilka 2021; Tyler and Cohen 2008).⁹

Queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia

As a form of resistance, parody has been criticized for suffering the same inefficiencies as paranoia; just like simple exposure, mere laughter may be accused of not changing much, but, in fact, covering up performative failure. It may express a sort of ‘hip defeatism’, as Nussbaum (1999) said of Butler’s theory of parodic performativity. Defenders of the performative *and* transformative potential of parody, however, point out that ‘repetition with a difference’ is, in and of itself, a form of transgression, a means of not only putting the limitations of current power relations on display, but also transgressing these relations and, hence, widening their conditions of possibility (Allen 1998; Kenny 2008; Lloyd 2013).

The uncertainty involved in parodic trickery may be unsettling; if you are not laughing, the joke is probably on you. And even if you are laughing...well, it might be difficult to tell, as, to some degree, the parody involves everyone – including the parodist themselves. As such, parody is productive precisely because it is neither a complete refusal of the powers that be, nor an act of submission to power; it works within the realm of the possible by pointing out its current limitations, thereby creating a breach and opening a space of potential alterity. Thus, opposition becomes productive when rhetorically enacted in a ‘queer form’ (Rand 2008). Conceptually, Rand (2008, 299) argues, this notion highlights ‘...the undecidability from which rhetorical agency is

⁹ Queer, we should emphasize, is as ambiguous in theory as it is in practice. While our emphasis here is on the ‘critical queerness’ of parody, as identified in the work of Judith Butler, we might also – given the centrality of Sedgwick’s work to queer theory – envision a ‘reparative queerness’. Reparative queerness, however, would involve a different affective register from that of parodic performances. Parody, in sum, may be inherently queer, but queer is not necessarily parodic. We shall concern ourselves with the issue of whether and how queer parrhesia may become reparative in the discussion.

actualized'. In the particular context of parrhesia, we will seek to show, queer forms open up spaces in-between and work as interruptions of the currently dominant principles and practices of power.

Here, articulatory practices that are paranoid in their content and parodic in their form present themselves as one such queer form, a register for performing queer parrhesia. Queer parrhesia, we suggest, operates on a hermeneutics of suspicion that seeks to expose the villainy of power but articulates the paranoid suspicion as parody – not only destabilizing power, but also questioning its alternatives, thereby raising the suspicion that recognition of previously subjugated positions will inevitably lead to new forms of coercion (Butler 2004, 115). Thus, the ethics and aesthetics of queer parrhesia, as expressed in and through parodic paranoia, suspend stabilization and, concomitantly, enable a politics of perpetual change, of resisting social reification through constant reimagination in and of the present.

Seeking to conceptualize queer parrhesia in the register of parodic paranoia, we perform an ethical-aesthetic critique (Weiskopf 2014) of an illustrative case: that of Chelsea Manning. In turning to the analysis of Manning's rhetorical repertoire, we do not mean to suggest that queer parrhesia could not be performed in other registers. We only aim to show how parodic paranoia works for Chelsea Manning and to discuss whether and how this repertoire might be particularly productive for the socio-technical moment in which she performs her queer parrhesia.

We return to the latter point in the concluding discussion and unpack the former in the analysis.

First, however, we present the methodological considerations on which the analysis is based – and the concerns which it raises.

Methodological considerations

We understand the ‘case’ of Chelsea Manning as illustrative of the potential of enacting queer parrhesia in and through parodic paranoia. Hence, the analysis of Manning’s primary election campaign provides occasion to become theoretically involved (Halberstam 2011) as we will detail in the discussion, but our contribution is theory-driven rather than empirical (for a similar approach, see Rhodes 2016). While conceptually-oriented readings (Jasinski 2001) of select texts are common within rhetorical studies, the practice is less familiar in organization and management studies.

Therefore, this section serves to introduce our rhetorical methods of data collection and analysis to the study of culture and organization.

Data collection: Reading Chelsea Manning

The process of selecting and assembling the empirical case, of establishing the ‘text’ that is to be read, McGee (1990) argues, is the primary task of the rhetorical critic. In a media landscape that has only become more fragmented in the 30 years since he made this claim, rhetorical processes have no stable centres, whether understood as specific utterances or particular platforms. Instead, critics must piece together their artefacts from various fragments, making sense of what is said as they go along.

Rhetorical critics, then, do not study an already existing reality, but actively co-construct it in and through their choices of what texts to analyse and which concepts to use. Following Brock (2018), we suggest that such piecing together is not just an epistemological but also a normative construct. More specifically, the impossibility of representation raises the ethical question of how to stay true – or, perhaps more realistically, loyal – to the subjects one studies, especially when those subjects represent minority positions that are all too often ignored and/or misrepresented in mainstream

media (for a succinct critique of such misrepresentation, see O’Shea 2019). Thus, there is very little likelihood that the Chelsea Manning we re-present is identical to Chelsea Manning’s own view of herself – especially not the view she holds now, years after the campaign.¹⁰ Similarly, we have no intention of making any claims to knowing or discerning her intentions. As we read the selected fragments of Manning’s texts, however, we hope to be allies of the positions and aims she expressed when running for office (for a similar endeavour, see Maxwell 2019).

In order to improve our chances of such alignment, the analysis is centred around one key text, Chelsea Manning’s video announcing her candidature, as well as a corpus of her tweets from the campaign period (January-June 2018). As will be detailed below, we use this material to identify the subject position of the queer parrhesiastes as enacted in and through parodic paranoia. Hence, the analysis only presents one particular version of the various subject positions available to and enacted by Manning, and it does not include any other subjects (only referencing commentary on tweets when deemed absolutely necessary).

However, our research process included a much wider set of texts as scattered across a range of digital platforms (ranging from mainstream media representations through artistic productions to activist interventions), and our understanding of Manning, the subject position we construct here, is necessarily influenced by this material. Therefore, we begin the analysis with a brief presentation of how Manning is positioned – or how we view her as being positioned – in this material before we

¹⁰ Revisiting Manning’s Twitter account, it is immediately clear that her rhetorical repertoire is no longer the same. In late 2021, when we were finalising this study, there were not as many emojis and other stylistic gimmicks, but the political content was tempered in different ways – most notably, with pandemic (dis)content. In terms of Manning, then, what we offer is at best a snapshot of a subject position she once held. In conceptual terms, however, this position holds enduring relevance as an illustration of queer parrhesia.

go on to study how she works with and against this established position. For now, however, let us detail the analytical strategy of identifying a rhetorical repertoire.

Analytical strategy: Parodic paranoia as rhetorical repertoire

In reading Chelsea Manning's practices of parrhesia, we are concerned with her political style, understood as the performative integration of message and mode of articulation (Hariman 1995). More particularly, we study Manning's rhetorical repertoire, the ways in which she articulates her activism, understanding this repertoire not just as so many tropes and figures, specific means of expression, but as manoeuvres that enable the subject to perform certain subject positions *and* to do so strategically (Phillips 2006).

Here, 'to perform' both invokes the ability to become somebody, to take up a certain position, and to wield the agency inherent in that position. Thus, one may perform an identity not just so as to be that person, but to be able to do what that person does. The possibility of resistance, Phillips (2006, 310) argues, hinges on the '...productive tension between the multiplicity of the subject and the singularity of the subject position'. That is, the subject may take on a number of different positions, wielding their agency strategically, and rhetorical manoeuvres constitute the particular ways in which this is done, producing and using the tension between multiplicity and singularity in and through discourse. Rhetorical manoeuvres are, we might say, the procedures of parrhesia and, as such, the main concern of our analysis is to identify and explain Chelsea Manning's style; her repertoire for establishing subject positions and agencies.

Analysis: Achieving and defying positionality with parodic paranoia

The rhetorical artefact, as we have pieced it together from fragments scattered in space and time, may be chronologically ordered. First, we present the narratives that were established about Chelsea Manning during her time in prison and in the first months after her release; here, we draw on widely circulated accounts in mainstream media. Second, we attend to the moment in which Manning announced her bid to run for US senate, using the announcement video as our key artefact and, hence, moving from media representations of Manning to her mediated self-presentation. The third part of the analysis follows Chelsea Manning's campaign communication on Twitter, detailing the articulation of her political platform. Here, we will occasionally gesture to the various contestations that Manning encountered during this process, but only as her engagement with such contestation is relevant to the establishment of her platform.

'Absent her own voice': The duelling narratives of Chelsea Manning

As indicated in the introduction, mainstream media have constructed two duelling narratives of Chelsea Manning: 'She has been lauded as a hero by some on the left but also decried as a traitor by many, including President Trump' (Jouvenal and Portnoy 2018; see also Shaer 2017). The traitor-narrative is quite simple: Manning has illegally leaked confidential military information and, hence, should have remained in prison. As such, its proponents do not have any wish for further engagement with Manning, and there are no means for her to further engage with them. Rather, the relationship here is one of pure opposition.

The hero-narrative may be seen as the reverse of the traitor-narrative in so far as the leak is reinterpreted not as a cowardly act of treason, but as a heroic act of whistleblowing. This, for

instance, is the appraisal extended by Žižek (2013) who positions Manning along with Snowden and Assange as ‘our new heroes’:

...whistleblowers play a crucial role in keeping the ‘public reason’ alive. Assange, Manning, Snowden, these are our new heroes, exemplary cases of the new ethics that befits our era of digitalized control. They are no longer just whistleblowers who denounce the illegal practices of private companies to the public authorities; they denounce these public authorities themselves when they engage in ‘private use of reason’.

Here, Manning is posited as a parrhesiastes who practices ‘the art of revolt’ in confronting a no-longer ethical state authority (de Lagasnerie 2017). Žižek, interestingly, is not the only public intellectual to have articulated this view; voices as disparate as that of Habermas have also praised Manning for the act of whistleblowing (Weill 2013).

In the hero-narrative, Chelsea Manning is not only a ‘champion of transparency’, but also a ‘transgender icon’. For some, this elevates her to the state of a ‘secular martyr’ (Shaer 2017) who has suffered for personal as well as social justice. For others, however, the two strands of the hero-narrative are not as seamlessly interconnected. As Wikileaks and other hacktivist groupings have in various ways become associated with the alt-right, progressives have, on the one hand, expressed concern with Manning’s continued connections with and potential commitments to such environments – as became particularly apparent when she attended a party in celebration of the first anniversary of Trump’s presidency at which she allegedly fraternised with the likes of ‘Proud Boys’-founder Gavin McInnes (Cross 2018; Pilkington 2018b). Hacktivist communities, on the

other hand, have not always been entirely welcoming to Chelsea Manning and other transgender people, fuelling suspicions that this community is, indeed, rife with misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia (Lee and Currier 2018).

Thus, the narrative of Manning-the-hero traverses the increasingly deep divide between different camps in the ongoing ‘culture wars’ (see Nagle 2017); she is positioned as hacktivist *and* transactivist at a time when it is no longer immediately clear how to be both. The details of how Chelsea Manning employs the hacktivist and the transactivist strands of the narrative, respectively, will guide the subsequent rounds of analysis, leading to a consideration of what happens when the two subject positions merge in Manning’s use of them.

‘We need someone willing to fight’: The rhetorical manoeuvre of hacktivist paranoia

Chelsea Manning began speaking up for and about herself as soon as she was released from prison on May 17, 2017, but we have chosen to centre the first round of analysis of Manning’s own articulation of her subject position around the video that announces her bid to run for US senate for the Democrats in Maryland. Two main reasons support this choice: First, the video marks a turning point in Manning’s career, moving from a position as influencer of public opinion to seeker of public office.¹¹ Second, it marks a pinnacle of one of the two rhetorical manoeuvres on which Manning draws in the enactment of queer parrhesia; that of hacktivist paranoia.

The video was released on *The Guardian’s* YouTube Channel on January 14, 2018 (*Guardian News* 2018) and presented on Chelsea Manning’s twitter account on January 17 (Manning 2018), the day

¹¹ While we will subsequently analyse the parodic aspects of her tweets, there are no indications that Manning’s run for office was anything but serious. To the contrary, the analysis indicates the great communicative efforts and personal costs that went into campaigning. As such, let us emphasize the point that parody does not preclude sincerity.

marking the anniversary of the announcement of her commutation. The video, which is one minute and 11 seconds long, begins in the usual style of campaign ads, with a short still of Chelsea Manning and an inserted close-up of her saying: 'I am Chelsea Manning, and I approve this message', but then turns into an exposé of the tropes of political resistance. First, the screen goes blank and the message 'no signal' appears, accompanied by ominous static noise and visual snow, then images from the Charlottesville nationalist rally in 2017 come on, followed in quick succession by scenes of police brutality against protesting youth, torch-bearing and saluting neo-Nazi demonstrators, and, then, a shot of politicians at a parliamentary session. This sequence is complemented with Manning's voice-over saying: 'We live in trying times, times of fear, of suppression, hate. We don't need more or better leaders'. Then a short shot of the Women's March, held the day after Trump's inaugural, and a brief image of a backlit waving flag is shown as Manning continues: 'We need someone willing to fight'.

At this point a person, possibly Manning herself, is seen from the back approaching and then entering the front door of the office of a US senator. 'We need to stop asking them to give us our rights. They won't support us', the voice-over declares as the image changes to pictures of a meeting in Trump's oval office covered by a news headline announcing: 'The same democrats who denounce Trump as a lawless, treasonous authoritarian just voted to give him vast warrantless spying powers'. 'They won't compromise', the voice-over explains. And accompanied by a shot of the White House, the speak continues: 'We need to stop expecting that our systems will somehow fix themselves'.

Here, Manning appears on screen, walking purposefully through an urban environment, then striking a determined pose and holding a rose in front of a graffitied wall. 'We need to actually take

the reins of power from them. We need to challenge them at every level’, the voice-over says and then, as the camera zooms in on Manning’s serious facial expression, ‘We need to fix this. We don’t need them anymore’. A final quick cut to the US Senate as seen from a distance, then back to Manning, now standing on a roof top: ‘We can do better. You’re damn right we got this’. More static noise, then a final still with the text ‘CHELSEA MANNING for U.S. SENATE 2018 Maryland Democratic Primary #WEGOTTHIS’ on a black background adorned with hearts, a smiley with sunglasses, a raised fist emoji, and a rainbow baseline.

We have presented this detailed summary, first, in the effort to give as much room to Chelsea Manning’s own voice as is possible in an academic paper and, second, to let its antagonistic and uncompromising stance speak for itself. The ethics, here, are clearly both cynical and paranoid in the sense developed above: the system will not fix itself; this is a fact that must be exposed. However, the poise is not defeatist nor does it degenerate into a celebration of the truth of its paranoia. To the contrary, the ethics of paranoia supports a revolutionary message: the powers that be must be replaced.

Let us turn, briefly, to one other text as a means of indicating that this message is not unique to the announcement video, but runs through Manning’s public communication quite consistently. As early as January 26, 2017 – after the announcement of her commutation, but before she was released from prison (and, significantly, after Trump’s inauguration) – *The Guardian* published a column written by Chelsea Manning, entitled ‘Compromise does not work with our political opponents. When will we learn?’ In this opinion piece, Manning writes:

The one simple lesson to draw from President Obama's legacy: do not start off with a compromise. They won't meet you in the middle. Instead, what we need is an unapologetic progressive leader. We need someone who is unafraid to be criticized, since you will inevitably be criticized. We need someone willing to face all of the vitriol, hatred and dogged determination of those opposed to us. Our opponents will not support us nor will they stop thwarting the march toward a just system that gives people a fighting chance to live. Our lives are at risk – especially for immigrants, Muslim people and black people. We need to stop asking them to give us our rights. We need to stop hoping that our systems will right themselves. We need to actually take the reins of government and fix our institutions. We need to save lives by making change at every level (Manning 2017b).

The messages of the two texts are remarkably similar in form as well as content, but in the announcement video Manning positions herself as the 'unapologetic progressive leader', which the column calls for. The rhetorical manoeuvre, then, begins from the subject position of the hacktivist paranoiac, using the militant style of that position to make bold and uncompromising claims against the powers that be. However, it replaces the detached cynicism of this stance with a more engaging form, promoting the invoked subject position as a viable alternative to the illegitimate power it has exposed. Thus, paranoia turns from an ethical stance to an aesthetic form with which Manning may build her next position.

'Is this #wegotthis?': The rhetorical manoeuvre of transactivist parody

Paranoia, however, cannot turn content into form – and, hence, make room for productive alternatives – without some mechanism of unhinging form from content, of awakening the

suspicion that something is awry or has gone astray. Parody, as we have argued, is one such mechanism – and one frequently employed by Chelsea Manning.

In support of this observation, we turn from the announcement video to the myriad other utterances made by and about Chelsea Manning. As mentioned in the introduction, since her release from prison Manning has been highly active as a speaker at rallies and other events, she has given interviews to newspapers and other media, and, importantly, she has built up her online presence, particularly on Twitter. On social media, Manning presents an alternative subject position to that of the cynical hacktivist; an alternative towards which the announcement video's final still gestures with its hashtag, emojis, and rainbow banner. Moderating the militant style and leaving the viewer with a friendlier feel, it opens up the possibility that Chelsea Manning's mode of political resistance is not one of pure protest, but includes the tensions that are necessary for resistance to become productive.

As mentioned, we focus this analytical section on Manning's tweets after the announcement video, but it is important to note that the style of these tweets was already well-established pre-announcement and played into the reception of the announcement video, just as the video plays into the reception of her subsequent tweets. From the tweet documenting her 'first steps of freedom' onwards, Manning has indulged in all manner of digital play, replete with elaborate use of emojis, careful construction of personal animated avatars, and application of butterflies, birds, and other image filters.

In turning to Chelsea Manning's tweets from the campaign period, we first worked with a rough coding of 'personal' and 'political', but soon realized that in her case the old slogan about the

collapse of these categories is certainly true. For Manning the personal *is* the political – and vice versa. Nor could we categorize the tweets according to how much attention they generate, as there appears to be no pattern in distribution of likes and comments across Manning’s tweets. Instead, we have sought to thematize the tweets along with the reactions they generate, identifying three broad categories: everyday resistance, playful interventions, and rogue escalations. These categories are non-exhaustive and, indeed, non-exclusionary. However, they are, as we will seek to illustrate below, specific articulations of the rhetorical manoeuvre we label transactivist parody and, hence, productive of the singular subject position with which this part of the analysis is concerned.

Everyday resistance

Tweets of everyday resistance are both frequent and popular, meaning Manning often posts things like ‘Good night’ and ‘Good morning’, pictures of herself in mundane situations, and other ‘stuff of life’, always accompanied with rainbows, hearts, and/or smileys and sometimes explicitly followed with a statement like ‘we have more power than they do’ or the hashtag #wegotthis. Such tweets may, in themselves, seem insignificant, but their number and popularity with followers speak of their function.

In an interview, Manning has said of ‘we got this’ that it is ‘a mantra that she developed in prison to buoy up her spirits at times of despair’ (Pilkington 2018a), and the insistent character of the tweets adds a defiant edge to what might otherwise be seen as rather cutesy reports on daily life. In sum, these tweets say ‘I’m here (goddammit)’, indicating how eating tacos or playing Stardew Valley may in themselves be acts of resistance, of insisting on claiming one’s place in the world; something to celebrate and continue fighting for.

Playful interventions

The second group, which we have labelled playful interventions, constitute Chelsea Manning's most explicit use of humour as a means of defusing criticism – whether addressed at her person or her politics. They are usually responses to someone else's comments on Manning's tweets or her own commentary on re-tweets. As just one case in point, Manning re-tweeted a comment that might be read as criticism of her campaign platform, defusing the critique by describing it as 'accurate' (Manning 2018b).

However, Manning does not always simply recognize critique or acknowledge others' right to their opinions; sometimes the exact opposite happens to equally comical effect. For example, when Manning replied to a tweet asking LGBTQ+ people to stop talking about their identities with a blunt 'no', the seriousness of the initial tweet was efficiently defused. In subsequent answers to this thread, moreover, Manning went in the other direction – using excess as the tool of choice by repeating 'im trans' 28 times (Manning 2018c).

Further, this group contains a plethora of tweets that play with technological affordances, like overlays on pictures or making cartoon versions of oneself. Tweets in this category, then, illustrate the many different ways in which Chelsea Manning experiments with the forms of existence and resistance that arise at the interstices of identity politics and internet culture.

Rogue escalations

When someone called out Manning's use of emojis, etc. as being politically inefficient, she answered in characteristic deadpan manner, agreeing that victory does not come with emojis but with numbers – followed by a bunch of emojis. This example, we believe, provides a nice segue

from playful interventions to the category we have labelled rogue escalations, as it shows how not everything is, in fact, rainbows and unicorns with Manning. Rather, the many emojis provide a pretty overlay to her willingness to ‘stay with the trouble’ even if and when conflicts escalate or interactions run wild.

Although adorned with hearts and rainbows, the combative style that permeates the announcement video is also present in Manning’s Twitter feed as, for instance, became apparent in her response to the abovementioned incident of the alt-right party. Here, Manning (2018d) talked about her prison experience and of facing enemies face-to-face. Thus, Manning is sometimes as uncompromising in her tweets as she is in the video, especially in dealing with accusations of not being progressive and/or radical enough.

Indeed, the experience of campaigning seems to have hardened Manning’s stance and turned off any hopes she might have harboured for conventional democracy. Thus, the tweets that mark the end of the campaign seem to be back where we started, in the realm of paranoia, as the hopeful ‘we will win with numbers’ has given way to the more pessimistic belief that ‘voting won’t change anything’ (Manning 2018e). Indeed, one might ask whether Chelsea Manning’s use of parody is but a stylistic temperance of her paranoia, an aesthetic sugar-coating to make her ethics more palatable? We do not believe this to be the case; rather, we argue that parody is as integral to Manning’s position as is paranoia; that she practices queer parrhesia in and through parodic paranoia.

Towards a low theory of queer parrhesia

To support this claim, let us examine the sense in which we believe Manning’s rhetorical register to add up to a low theory of queer parrhesia. Low theory, as Halberstam (2011, 15) defines it, is a

mode of conceptualization ‘that seeks not to explain but to involve’. Thus, we are not seeking abstract generalizations but further engagement with the subject position that Manning enacts through the rhetorical manoeuvres of parodic paranoia. In particular, we seek further involvement with the performative potential of Manning’s trans-activism. In this context, invoking Butler’s (1988, 1993) concept of gender performativity does not imply that Manning’s subject position is anything but real. Although parodic performances of gender (e.g. ‘camp’ or ‘drag’) may serve activist purposes in calling out dominant gender norms and resisting the compulsion to ‘pass’ or be ‘closeted’ within them (Butler 1990, 187; see also Halberstam 2005), this is not Manning’s style. In her particular mode of queer parrhesia, the performative tensions involved destabilize activist agency rather than trans identity.

Contextualized thus, we understand the seeming reversion to paranoia towards the end of Manning’s campaign as a cry of frustration with the inertia of conventional politics. It is an expression of the hopeless, a slip into the despair of cynical resistance that the invoked subject position otherwise avoids. Freed from the attempt to achieve influence through parliamentary means, however, parodic paranoia regains its potential to become a productive mode of resistance to the powers that be – and to destabilize the usual modes of resistance.

In sum, Chelsea Manning’s rhetorical repertoire maintains the ethics of paranoia, but performs it in and as the aesthetics of parody. Replete with frequent winks and other similarly devious gestures, parody pries the severity of Manning’s stance open; it queers her parrhesia. Thereby, it provides the tension that may make her resistance productive, but also makes her subject position receptive to critique and disappointment.

As such, parody may at times protect Manning from harm; laughing at the opponent defuses critique. However, the parodic style does not simply function as a shield to complete the armour of paranoia. To the contrary, Chelsea Manning also mimics for real; she performs (as) herself. This highlights the precarity of Manning's subject position – in practicing (in the double sense of rehearsing *and* enacting) her politics, Manning becomes available to hostile as well as friendly engagement. Thus, she is constituted as a parrhesiastes in the full sense of speaking truth to power *and* doing so at great personal risk. And it is in her very willingness to suffer such risk, in the moment of failure, that Manning becomes able to perpetually (re-)imagine alternatives. Here, the rhetorical repertoire both achieves and defies the invoked subject position, opening up new opportunities for queer parrhesia.

Concluding discussion: Reimagining queer parrhesia as vulnerability in resistance

Seeking further involvement with queer parrhesia, we are drawn to Butler's recent efforts to hinge the possibility of resistance upon sensibility towards the suffering and weakness of self and others (Butler and Athanasiou 2013; Butler et al. (eds.) 2016) and to articulate 'the force of nonviolence' as a driver of social transformation towards 'radical equality' (Butler 2020). Here, vulnerability becomes a source of productive tension, as ethics of resistance and responsiveness merge to enable political engagement in the form of articulation of critique and imagination of alternatives. This, we believe, is also the point at which the particular practices of Chelsea Manning indicate the potential of queer parrhesia as a critical *and* reparative mode of engagement. By means of parodic paranoia Manning enacts a particular register of queer parrhesia and, hence, illustrates one way in which opposition may become performative, but in her willingness to accept failure and put her vulnerability on display she gestures towards other such registers, making further involvement possible.

Queer parrhesia, as we have sought to engage with it here, messes with power – and with the subject position that is typically forged by the parrhesiastes and conceptualized in terms of cynical detachment (Karfakis and Kokkinidis 2011). Contrary to this stance, queer parrhesia offers opportunities for ‘passionate attachment’ (Kenny, Fotaki and Vandekerckhove 2020) with alternative subjectivities, invoking less stereotypically masculine options for truth-telling and resistance (Agostinho and Thylstrup 2019). Queer parrhesia calls out, but it also takes in – and it constantly threatens to blow everything up (Szpilka 2021). Hence, it destabilizes power, truth, and critique – indicating the precarious interrelations of the three and the involvement of the parrhesiastes in their continuous re- and destabilizing of each other.

As particular instantiations of queer parrhesia, the aesthetics and ethics of parodic paranoia are interesting in and of themselves, showing how existing socio-political boundaries can be transgressed and alternative spaces made available. However, parodic paranoia, as expressed in Manning’s particular repertoire of everyday resistance, playful interventions, and rogue escalations, is but one register of queer parrhesia, which constantly presents alternatives – even to itself (Rand 2008). As a low theory, the practice of continuously (dis-)engaging with queer parrhesia must remain particular.

Further, queer parrhesia remains precarious; in practicing parodic paranoia Chelsea Manning demonstrates a remarkable willingness to put herself at risk and an equally impressive endurance when engaging with hostile others. When reaching out to potential allies, however, the subject position we have identified here becomes vulnerable and begins to disintegrate; building a new community demands opening up individual identities to the influence of others. It is, we believe, at

this point that queer parrhesia moves beyond the particular register of parodic paranoia, in Chelsea Manning's practice as well as in our conceptualization, inviting studies of other empirical practices as well as further conceptual development. With the present study, we hope to have indicated that the most productive tension of resistance may be that between opposing the other and surrendering the self.

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