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free speech, fearless speech and the problem of *parrhesia*

john m. carvalho

INTRODUCTION

What can *parrhesia* mean in a “post-truth” era? When factual claims are deemed “fake” because they are unflattering and the alternative is hyperbolic name-calling that does not even rise to the level of *ad hominem* fallacy, what does it take to tell the truth to oneself and another? In this essay, I posit that *parrhesia* is not, as is commonly thought, “saying everything” fearlessly or “speaking truth to power.” It is not one thing, but a problem that emerges precisely where speech is free, speakers are fearless, and the truth is uncomfortable. Truths are uncomfortable when they cause the one who hears them to give up a form of life that otherwise

serves them well. Courage is required to speak such truths when the one hearing them can harm the speaker, especially because the hearer is a friend and the one speaking is loath to lose their friendship. But what force can *parrhesia* have when the value of truth is said to be so thoroughly maligned as to be irrelevant? What can a truth-teller say to those who traffic in “alternative facts?” Why would someone risk speaking the truth to another who could do them harm for speaking it and who they know in advance holds that the only truth is what serves their comfortable life? Can such a truth-teller be motivated by the conviction that there are still truths worth telling and ways of telling them because the claims of a post-truth era are premature or *passé*?

What is at stake in these considerations is nothing less than the nature of the truth and the role of *parrhesia* in speaking or, as we will come to say, staging the truth. What is it about such truths that they can be heard by the one whose form of life warrants revealing them? How has a speaker identified the truths, the need to reveal them and the language that can effectively communicate them to the one addressed? Must the speaker’s life be free of shortcomings or just freer from them to detect defects in the one they address? And if the character of the speaker will not be free from defects, how has the speaker a presentiment of the truths and their potential efficacy for redirecting the life of the other and themselves? Because, when it comes to *parrhesia*, the one revealing the truth by staging it is improved in a measure comparable to an improvement in the one to whom that truth is revealed. Which returns us, again, to questions about the nature of this truth.

In this essay, we first explore claims about a “post-truth” era by identifying its source, examining its dissemination and saying what it can mean to test the truth of claims about “post-truth.” We, next, compare that truth to the truths expressed as *parrhesia* in the texts of the ancient Greeks and in the contemporary expression “fearless speech.” We trace the source of that contemporary expression to the course Michel Foucault gave in the fall of 1983 at the University of California, Berkeley, under the title “The Discourse on Truth: The Problematization of

Parrhesia,” subsequently published as *Fearless Speech*.¹ We note the importance of Plato’s *Alcibiades* in Foucault’s discourse on truth, and the importance, for us, of the problematising of *parrhesia* in the discourse on democracy that can be found in ancient Greek sources from the fourth century before the Christian era. We draw on an opportunity Foucault misses in his account of *parrhesia* to resist his admonition that we not assume for ourselves debates about “free speech” that emerged in a time and under circumstances quite different from our own. In fact, we speculate about what can be learned from that ancient quarrel about a society – our own – where fearless speech passes as free speech and tends to implausible fictions that desperately veil a truth that abides in things. Might *parrhesia* in our time lift that veil with a staging of the truth that Foucault termed “alethurgy” and that can form the basis for an aesthetics of existence?

POST-TRUTH

The term “post-truth” officially entered the English-language lexicon when it was included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Third Edition 2017) as an adjective originating in the United States “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”² The first documented use of the term in this sense can be traced to an article by Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich in *The Nation* (6 January 1992). There Tesich wrote,

We are rapidly becoming prototypes of a people that totalitarian monsters could only drool about in their dreams. All the dictators up to now have had to work hard at suppressing the truth. We, by our actions, are saying that this is no longer necessary, that we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can denude truth of any significance. In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.³

In such a world, Tesich argues, the truth has lost its political efficacy.

Tesich was writing with the debacle of Watergate in mind. In that hot mess, a sitting President conspired to dissemble about the purposes of the break-in at Democratic Party headquarters in Washington, D. C. This executive malice followed on the heels of revelations in the *Pentagon Papers* that the government had lied to the American people about the state of the war in Vietnam and acted to suppress that information. Democracy prevailed in those circumstances. The *Pentagon Papers* were published. Nixon resigned in disgrace, but the effect, Tesich concluded, was that people came to associate the truth with bad news. And Ronald Reagan, correctly surmising that people preferred to hear a sunny story, later used that inference to dissimulate widely, including about the Iran-Contra Affair. Tesich wrote for *The Nation* in the aftermath of the First Gulf War (1990 – 1991) conducted during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, Reagan’s vice president for eight years, about which there was conflicting information.⁴ In that case, the truth about the U.S. invasion of Iraq was suppressed, but the reasons for the invasion were not publicly questioned.

What Tesich called a “post-truth world” really took off, however, ten years later in the run-up to the Second Gulf War conducted during the presidency of George W. Bush, the son of former President Bush. Following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, 11 September 2001, the Bush administration leveraged the shared trauma of a people attacked by proxy to throw a national security blanket over the truth and gin up a fictional narrative justifying a counterattack against an enemy that had not been vanquished the first time around. It was, arguably, the beginning of an appeal to people’s feelings (they were vulnerable) and personal beliefs (in freedom at all costs) to motivate action. By trading on the sense that “America” was attacked on 11 September, it made a victim of everything identified as American and an enemy of everything that challenged that identity.

What got the attention of the *Oxford English Dictionary* editors, however, was the twenty-fold uptick in instances of “post-truth” in coverage of the U. S. presidential election in 2016 and the vote on the Brexit referendum that same year. This use likely encouraged the editors to state in their rationale for naming it the word of

the year for 2016 that “post-truth” is often used in association with a particular noun in the expression “post-truth politics.”⁵ The “post” in “post-truth” does not denote a past time, as “post-war” refers to a period after a war, but to a time when the specified concept has become irrelevant or *passé*, the way “post-racial” and “post-feminist” mistakenly refer to a period when racial minorities and women would have equal rights with White men because “racism” and “feminism” had become *de trop*.

Most commentators draw a contrast between the deception that is generally part of political life and the post-truth dissimulation that is supposed to have taken hold of today’s public discourse. The general deception in politics begins with facts that are suitably ambiguous and interpretations that promote one truth rather than another. Post-truth dissimulation advances on that strategy by declaring what is manifestly false to be true and doubling down on those fabrications to smother all claims to the contrary. In addition, the falsehoods disseminated on the post-truth model are calculated to speak to what targeted constituencies want to be true precisely because they are not. By mirroring the disconnect between what is true and what those constituencies want to be true, post-truth dissimulators reflect the victimisation felt so painfully by those disaffected constituents. Thus, the deception peddled by the purveyors of post-truth appeals to affect over known facts and the kinds of personal beliefs that answer to no outside, objective criteria.

Another distinguishing feature of post-truth deception is its deployment of social media to accelerate the speed and expand the range of its circulation. In its most recent development, the dissemination of post-truth can be scaled up by using generative pre-trained transformers (chatbots) to cull personal data from the Internet and precisely target markets of disaffected constituents with the intent of making them even more disaffected. The aim of this post-truth is precisely to sow distrust in the truth itself creating a constituency prepared to be led by a demagogue who will show it the way, or any way that preserves its deep-seated antipathy toward reasoned argument and its determined commitment to what they believe in their hearts, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. That

some can see this trending across the globe indicates that not everyone is likewise disaffected and that there remain those committed to telling the truth about post-truth.⁶ Claims about a post-truth era, then, appear to be premature. In fact, more than a few commentators have taken a stand outside its aura, but “post-truth” is not yet *passé*. It is rather pervasive in the public sphere and a problem that must be addressed.

PARRHESIA

As is commonly known, the word *parrhesia* is formed from two ancient Greek words, *pas* and *rhêsis*. The first is an adjective familiar (in its neuter form, *pan*) for denoting “all” or “every.” The second is less familiar. It is a noun that denotes “speech” or “a saying,” especially the speech that might be given by a character in a play or the saying associated with an author.⁷ In the 19th century, *rhêsis* was said to be etymologically rooted in the verb *rheô* which has two distinct meanings, “to rush or flow” and “to say,” though only the first meaning was actually extant in ancient Greek texts.⁸ Many will be inclined to associate *rhêsis* with the second meaning, leaving the first behind, but two meanings were likely thought to reside in one word for a reason. So, let’s consider that there might be a connection between rushing or flowing and saying, that *rhêsis* could refer to the tendency of speech to rush or flow out of us.

The form of the verb *rheô* that means “to say” is referred in the lexicons to the actually extant verb, *erô*. *Erô* is the future tense of a rare present tense verb, *eirô*.⁹ As a future tense verb, *erô* means “I will say, proclaim or tell” something to someone. This future tense captures the sense that there is something about to be said that is known to the speaker who is about to say or declare it. It is something he cannot or will not hold back. It is ready to rush or flow out of him, we might say. *Parrhesia*, then, with the added significance of *pas*, would appear to denote a readiness to declare not just some part of what a speaker is ready to state, but all of it, with every bit ready to rush out of him. We could say *parrhesia* – as a quality of political life for which the Athenians are said to be famous – refers to

a political constitution where everyone, everywhere says everything they have to say, or something known to them that they feel compelled to disclose. No one holds back what they hold to be true, and they speak not so much to persuade others as to declare that truth.

It is precisely this quality of life that led to the problem of *parrhesia* identified and discussed in the course Foucault gave at Berkeley. On the one hand, a commitment to the democratic constitution of Athens appears to require that everyone, everywhere, the *demos*, the many, say everything it pleases them to say without giving a thought to what it might be best to say. On the other hand, when speech is so free and distributed among so many speakers of whatever character, it drowns out the *parrhesia* of those speakers disposed to put the good of democracy, what might be true for the whole, ahead of their individual pleasure. In the course at Berkeley, Foucault contrasts the unthinking, political *parrhesia* of the *demos* with a philosophical *parrhesia* he also describes as “Socratic” that links *parrhesia* to an *epimeleia heautou* or “care of oneself” that proves to be his main concern in these reflections.¹⁰ Foucault tells us that political *parrhesia* – truly fearless speech – as it came to be practiced in the Athenian “democracy,” led to demagoguery: the rise of tyrants who tell the rabble what they already think is true for the sake of aggrandising the tyrants’ own position and not propound what might be true for the whole or true at all. Sound familiar?

In the transcript from the course at Berkeley, Foucault draws our attention to the first appearance of the word *parrhesia* in the tragedies of Euripides (fl. 431 – 408 BCE). This dating is consistent with the record in Liddell, Scott and Jones, which locates the first use of the noun in Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (428) and reports instances of it in Euripides’ *Ion* (c. 413), *Phoenician Women* (c. 410) and *Bacchae* (405). With so many documents from antiquity lost to history, we cannot know whether the term, used in *Hippolytus* to describe a quality of political life for which the Athenians are highly esteemed, did not appear in documents that were not preserved. It is not surprising, however, that it is preserved in the public documents of an aristocratic class of poets and in the more prosaic tragedies

of Euripides than in those by Aeschylus and Sophocles, which treated largely mythological themes.

Foucault gives special attention to the deployment of *parrhesia* in Euripides' *Orestes* (408 BCE, not cited by Liddell, Scott and Jones). The word turns up there in the speech by a messenger reporting to Electra what transpired at the Pelasgian court where her brother Orestes is on trial for matricide. Orestes, conspiring with his sister, killed their mother, Clytemnestra and her consort, Aegisthus, to avenge the killing of their father, Agamemnon, by their mother's lover. The messenger reports four speeches. The first is the one given by Talthybius, herald to Agamemnon, described as not free, but subservient to those with power, who twisted eulogy and censure together in the hopes of winning the approbation of Aegisthus' friends. As a herald, he does not know what is true. He speaks merely to gratify what he takes to be the winning side. The second is the one given by Diomedes, "famous as a Greek warrior both for his courageous exploits and his noble eloquence."¹¹ Diomedes advocates a moderate position, exile rather than death, to purge the city of impiety. Some of those assembled agree, some do not.

The two speeches that follow are not attributed to mythological individuals, but Foucault notes, to two social types.¹² "The first one (who is symmetrical to Talthybius, the bad orator), is the sort of orator who is bad for democracy ... He has a 'mouth like a running spring' ... someone who has a tongue but not a door ... someone who cannot shut his mouth."¹³ Speech rushes out of him without regard for what he has to say. In addition, what he says has no regard for the value of rational discourse (*logos*) as a means for gaining access to the truth.¹⁴ Consequently, he is *ischuôn thrasei*, "a giant of impudence" or "strong only by his bold arrogance."¹⁵ He is "not confident in his ability to formulate articulate discourse but only in his ability to generate an emotional reaction from his audience by his strong and loud voice."¹⁶ He puts his confidence, thus, in "ignorant outspokenness," *amathei parrhesia*. He claims the civil right of *parrhesia* guaranteed by the Athenian democratic constitution, but since his *parrhesia* lacks learning, *mathêsis*, it is nothing but affective noise lacking in positive political effects. And when speakers

use *parrhesia* without learning, *amathēi parrhesia*, Foucault concludes, the politics of the city suffer.¹⁷

The final speech recounted from Orestes' trial is made by a man described as plain looking and plain spoken. He owns land that he works himself and can be trusted to speak from a position of interest in the good of the city, of which his property is a part. In addition, because he is accustomed to giving instructions to servants, he knows how to make a case for courses of action best suited to assist him in the management of his affairs in a number of different circumstances. On the one hand, then, he makes a good soldier, always ready to march in defence of the city. On the other hand, he makes a good leader, able to give thoughtful directions for action. When the third speaker called for Orestes and Electra to be stoned to death drawing solely on the bluster in himself that he hoped to muster in the judges, the fourth speaker recommended that Orestes be honoured with crowns for avenging his father's honour, arguing that no man would otherwise arm himself and go to war leaving behind a wife who could be seduced by cowards who stayed at home.

The *Orestes* stands out in Foucault's reading of it for its depiction of *parrhesia* in a pejorative sense. Wherever else he invokes it, Euripides casts *parrhesia* positively or as a distinct and admirable trait of the Athenian constitution. In *Orestes*, however, *parrhesia* is shown as unthinking, unlearned (*amathēi*) and described as rushing out of the mouth of the speaker with no regard for *logos* (the truth) in a way that poses a threat to the city. What Foucault identifies as the problem of *parrhesia* turns up when a distinctive feature of Athenian politics threatens its democratic constitution. As a counter to the untoward effects of this political *parrhesia*, Foucault introduces a philosophical *parrhesia* found in the figure of Socrates represented in Plato's dialogues. For Foucault, Plato's *Apology* represents Socrates as someone who confronts craftsmen, poets and politicians, alike, with the uncomfortable truth that they do not know what they say they know.¹⁸ And in Plato's *Alcibiades*, Foucault finds Socrates leading his interlocutor to admit that he cannot govern the Athenian people if he does not govern himself, that

to govern himself he must know himself and that to know himself he must take care of himself. Foucault, thus, links philosophical *parrhesia* through the figure of Socrates with the *epimeleia heautou* or care of oneself that concerned him in the last years of his life.¹⁹

CARE OF THE SELF

There are two texts sometimes attributed to Plato titled *Alcibiades*. Both are devoted to dialogue between Socrates and the titular figure. In the one, referred to as *Alcibiades* or *Alcibiades I*, Socrates tries to persuade Alcibiades that he must first govern himself, if he hopes to govern others. In the second, called *Second Alcibiades* or *Alcibiades II*, Socrates counsels Alcibiades about what to ask of the gods when he prays. The attribution of both dialogues is subject to debate. Neither is included in the long-time, definitive English language collection of Plato's dialogues edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns.²⁰ The current definitive English language collection, edited by John Cooper, includes both, but presents the second as apocryphal.²¹ The authenticity of the first – in antiquity thought to be the best introduction to Plato's philosophy – was questioned in the 19th century and has few defenders today. As Cooper notes, "it is not generally agreed by scholars whether Plato is the author of this work."²² A cursory reading of the text reveals a flattened narrative lacking the dramatic flair and irony we regularly associate with Plato's style. A closer reading raises more doubts.

Foucault likely relied on the Budé critical edition of Plato's dialogues, completed in 1956, with the Greek text and a French translation on facing pages, the equivalent of the Loeb Classical Library collection in English.²³ That edition includes only *Alcibiades I* (as *Alcibiades*) and presents it as one of Plato's earliest works.²⁴ It would be there that Foucault found the Greek *epimeleia heautou* rendered as *le souci de soi*, which we translate as "care of the self." The Loeb translates the Greek as "taking pains over oneself," and D. S. Hutchinson translates it as "to cultivate oneself," while Liddell, Scott and Jones give as a first definition of *epimeleia* "care bestowed upon" or "attention given" to something and "diligence" before

giving as a definition of the verb *epimeleisthai* to “take care of, have charge or management of” and “to be engaged in, cultivate any pursuit, art, etc.”²⁵ What Hutchinson seems to want to capture with “cultivate” is the sense that the care Socrates recommends to Alcibiades will lead to the improvement of their selves or souls. In the dialogue (*Alcibiades* 124b and ff.), *epimeleia* is often paired with *techné*, indicating that care of the self will require a skill.

Many things about the dialogue, no doubt, get Foucault’s attention.²⁶ Paramount among them is the erotic relation between the two interlocutors. Socrates was Alcibiades’ lover many years prior to their meeting in this dialogue, and Alcibiades has had many suitors, all rebuffed, since. Here, Socrates claims he was the only one to truly love Alcibiades since the others only loved what belonged to Alcibiades while Socrates loved Alcibiades himself.

Socrates: Now if there was someone who loved Alcibiades’ body, he wouldn’t be loving Alcibiades only something that belonged to Alcibiades.

Alcibiades: That’s right.

Socrates: But someone who loved you would love your soul.

Alcibiades: By our argument, I think he’d have to.

Socrates: Wouldn’t someone who loved your body go off and leave you when your beauty is no longer in full bloom?

Alcibiades: Obviously.

Socrates: But someone who loved your soul will not leave you as long as you are making progress [becoming better, *beltion*].

Alcibiades: That’s probably right.

Socrates: Well, I’m the one who won’t leave you – I’m the one who will stay with you. Now that your body has lost its bloom and everyone else has gone away.

Alcibiades: I’m glad you are, Socrates, and I hope you never leave me.

Socrates: Then you must try to be as attractive [*kallistos*] as possible.

Alcibiades: I’ll certainly try. (*Alcibiades* 131c–d, Hutchinson translation)

This exchange takes place in the course of a discussion that ends the dialogue of what it means to take care of oneself and what the self is that is deserving of this care (*Alcibiades* 128a ff). It concludes by affirming that care of the self is a skilful knowing of the soul and of everything that belongs to that soul since the self that is the soul cannot be known apart from what belongs to it. This knowledge is said to be the same as self-control (*sôphrosunê*), and Alcibiades would, thus, make himself “as attractive as possible” by skilfully achieving this self-control.

Foucault does not note the lack of ambiguity in the dialogue nor the openly maieutic manner of Socrates’ questioning.²⁷ Instead, he focusses on the friendship formed from a mutual concern with a skilful taking care of themselves that can translate the Delphic call to “know yourself” into a measure of self-control that can match the exacting standard set by the Spartan and Persian kings.²⁸ To know yourself – *gnôthi sauton* – Socrates would have Alcibiades believe, you must take care of oneself – *epimeleia heautou* – and only in this way attain the self-rule that will qualify you to rule others. Foucault describes the question-and-answer, maieutic dialogue supporting this conclusion as “a certain ‘way of speaking,’ a certain ‘ethics of speech’ ... which is called, precisely *parrhesia*.”²⁹ “In ancient culture,” he elaborates, “telling the truth about oneself was an activity involving several people, an activity with other people, and even more precisely an activity with one other person, a practice for two.”³⁰

For Foucault, then, philosophical or Socratic *parrhesia*, the antidote to political *parrhesia*, is an “ethics of speech” that emerges in a dialogue aimed at caring for oneself and another out of friendship and out of a shared conviction that caring for oneself is the best way of honouring the Delphic command to know yourself. And the goal of this care is to cultivate in oneself a self-control and self-rule that qualifies one to rule others.³¹ One governs others and oneself by being the kind of friend in the company of whom another can tell the truth about themselves. In the Hellenistic schools and in late antiquity, this philosophical *parrhesia* turned from the preparation for a political life to the preparation for the cathartic release from such a life. The attention Foucault gives in the course at Berkeley to the “truth-

telling games” of the Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics is an attempt to give “a sort of prehistory of those practices which developed later around some famous couples: the penitent and the confessor, the person being guided and the spiritual director, the sick person and psychiatrist, the patient and the psychoanalyst.”³² The truth that emerges in philosophical *parrhesia* so fashioned is not a fact, but a revelation, a truth about oneself that would not be revealed except in dialogue staged with a friend.

Prior to its institutionalisation in the Christian confession, Foucault finds in *parrhesia* an ethics of speaking that stages the truth. Where in the Christian pastoral the penitent knows the truth which he confesses to the priest, in *parrhesia* the truth becomes manifest to the one hearing it only in the course of a dialogue with a friend. Alcibiades enters into a dialogue with Socrates not knowing where it will take him and is led by fits and starts to realise he is not prepared to govern others because he does not yet govern himself and that to govern himself, he must take care of himself. Uncharacteristically, and in another reversal of the Christian confession, Socrates appears to know in advance how he expects the dialogue to conclude. *Alcibiades* was taken in antiquity to be a summary of Plato’s philosophy in part because it models the so-called “Socratic method” according to which, in the manner of a midwife, Socrates draws out of his interlocutor a truth he finds nascent in their soul. In the Platonic dialogues nowadays called “Socratic,” Socrates is represented as not knowing where the dialogue is headed, and those dialogues conclude with the truth that neither Socrates nor his interlocutor know what is true.

ELENCHUS

At about the time Foucault was lecturing about *parrhesia*, Gregory Vlastos was writing about the Socratic *elenchus*.³³ For our purposes, we can understand the *elenchus* as Socrates’ standard method of testing the claims of his interlocutors to know something morally significant. The *elenchus* – rendered variously as “test,” “examination,” and “refutation” – turns up exclusively in those Platonic dialogues

called “Socratic,” which aim to give a definition of the concept in question. These dialogues represent Socrates as testing and refuting the claim of an interlocutor to know what he thinks he knows. Vlastos’ view is not uncontroversial. Vlastos invoked the distinction between elenctic knowledge – based on beliefs that survived testing by the *elenchus* – from certain knowledge – analytic truths, which Socrates disclaimed – to make sense of Socrates’ reputed claim that virtue depended upon knowledge, that he, Socrates, did not know and that he was nonetheless virtuous. According to Vlastos, Socrates’ elenctic knowledge was the basis for his claim to virtue, while his interlocutors had neither certain knowledge nor elenctic knowledge and, so, no basis for their claims to virtue.

The *elenchus* was, in Foucault’s terms, a certain ethics of speaking. It began with Socrates’ interlocutor claiming to know that *S* is *P*. Socrates would then question his interlocutor who would agree that he also believed that *A* and *B* and *C* were true about seemingly unrelated things, that believing *A* and *B* and *C* entailed that *D* was true about *S*, that *D* was the equivalent of *not-P* and that the interlocutor thereby believed both *P* and *not-P* about *S* at the same time. The interlocutor is, thus, shown to hold inconsistent beliefs, and the claim of *P* being true about *S* is disqualified. In the *elenchus*, the truth that emerges is that the interlocutor does not know *S* and does not know he does not know *S*, but we do not learn what is true about *S*. When in *Euthyphro*, the titular figure asserts that piety is what is loved by the gods, but also admits that the gods disagree with one another and take sides against one another, he has to acknowledge that the same thing will be both loved and hated by the gods; so he appears to believe that what is pious is both loved and hated by the gods and, as a result, pious and not pious at the same time. But certainly, piety will always be the same: pious, whether the gods love it or not. Euthyphro is, thus, convicted of holding inconsistent beliefs about piety and of not knowing that he does not know what he thinks he knows, and the dialogue ends without answering what piety truly is.

Socrates made a career of these elenctic examinations. It started with Socrates’ attempt to refute the Delphic Oracle who declared that no one was wiser than

Socrates, in response to a question put to it by Chaerephon.³⁴ Plato's elenctic dialogues represent examples of the kinds of examinations Socrates made of artisans, poets, and politicians to prove the god wrong by finding someone wiser, to no avail.³⁵ If he appears to be wiser than any of his interlocutors, Socrates concludes, it is because not knowing anything, he does not think he knows. The basis for his claims to virtue is just the consistency of his beliefs, which he tests at the same time as he tests the beliefs of his interlocutors.³⁶ The *elenchus* is a philosophic *parrhesia* in which Socrates tests what his interlocutors believe arriving at the truth that neither of them knows anything, but as Socrates is made to state in *Meno*, "we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know."³⁷

When Foucault, in the course at Berkeley, turns to a discussion of the elenctic dialogue *Laches*, he focusses on the occurrences of the word *parrhesia* in the dialogue and the association there with the care of the self.³⁸ Foucault renders care of the self in that dialogue as a question of education, and he describes Socrates as the truth-teller (*parrhesiastes*) best suited to educate the sons of the generals, Nicias and Laches. In this role, Foucault says, Socrates will lead the young men to give an account of themselves, that is, an account of how the rational discourse they have at their disposal, *logos*, what they have to say, squares with the way they live, *bios*. Foucault makes Socrates the ideal touchstone for testing the accord between a person's life and its principle of intelligibility because, he notes, Nicias and Laches declare their satisfaction in the dialogue with the way Socrates exhibited this accord in his own life. As such a touchstone, Foucault writes, it is appropriate for Socrates to take a leading role in this *parrhesiastic* exchange with his interlocutors.

This asymmetry in the *parrhesiastic* exchange where one partner takes a leading role in the dialogue matches the account Foucault gives of the erotic relation between men and young boys in *The Use of Pleasure* written at about the same time as his course given at Berkeley.³⁹ In that published volume, Foucault makes

a point of the way the young boy reciprocates the leading role the older man takes by drawing out of the man the responsible model he is to make for the boy.⁴⁰ This reciprocity does not figure in Foucault's reading of Plato's *Alcibiades* where there appears to be nothing Socrates learns from his young interlocutor. It does figure in our characterisation of the elenctic exchanges between Socrates and the numerous interlocutors he confronts in the early dialogues, including the elenctic exchange in *Laches*, where Socrates reciprocally tests his own beliefs about courage in the course of testing the beliefs of Laches and Nicias. At no point in this exchange, however, does Socrates claim any prior knowledge about the subject. If Socrates takes a leading role in the elenctic examinations of his interlocutors, it is not because of a presumed superiority in knowledge or virtue, but by a willingness, as in the passage from *Meno* just cited, to push the exchange forward when the interlocutor demurs, as he regularly does.

Importantly, Socrates does not pronounce any truths in these elenctic exchanges. He leaves it to his interlocutors to concede that they do not know what they thought they knew. While they have been capable of carrying forth in public settings about what they thought they knew, they concede they are struck dumb by Socrates' questioning. In *parrhesiastic* exchanges mobilised by the *elenchus*, the truth comes out or is staged as a result of a method of interrogation that is not what is commonly called the "Socratic method." It is rather something much subtler and disarming. Since Socrates never offers a positive alternative to what his interlocutors propose, he does not speak the truth nor does he, as a midwife, deliver from his interlocutors a truth nascent in their soul. Instead, the truth emerges that neither of them knows what the truth is and only Socrates insists that the most worthwhile thing a person can do with their life is search for what they do not know. His dedication to that search led Socrates to a death sentence. We should not tempt this fate in our response to post-truth politics since affordances for the Socratic irony that drives those elenctic exchanges are forcibly depleted from the post-truth landscape. Rather, if we consider how the elenctic dialogues present *parrhesia* as a problem, we might ask what ethics of

speaking will stage a truth that cannot be anticipated in advance, but that is true from the start about the lives of those speaking?

ALETHURGY

Foucault gives an illustration of what he means by staging the truth in his account of the drama in Euripides' *Ion*.⁴¹ From Hermes' prologue, the audience knows the truth about Ion's parentage. The god of the temple, Apollo, knows the truth of Ion's parentage, but Ion himself, his mother, Creusa, and his mother's husband, Xuthus, do not. The play stages the truth for the new-formed family. The problem of *parrhêsia* turns up here in the figure of a god who knows the truth, but will not tell it and in the promise of Ion's rights as an Athenian citizen. By comparison, in the elenctic dialogues, Plato knows the truth, but does not tell it. Instead, he represents the interlocutors as both unaware of the truth and Socrates as staging the truth for his interlocutor, all the while using the dialogue to stage the truth for the reader. The problem of *parrhêsia* turns up here in the mode of veridiction, the form of telling the truth, namely, the Socratic *elenchus*, which stages or enacts the truth without knowing it.

In the very last lectures at the Collège, Foucault contrasts the elenctic *parrhesia* of *Laches* with the maieutic *parrhesia* in *Alcibiades* saying the latter leads to a metaphysics of the soul while the former leads to an aesthetics of existence.⁴² It is this staging of the truth as an aesthetics of existence that holds the most promise for responding to the problem of *parrhesia* in post-truth politics, not by deploying the Socratic *elenchus*, but by invoking versions of its Cynic lineage. The fearless speech of post-truth politics cannot be challenged on the facts because it traffics in lies fabricated to fit a generalised fiction about the disservice done by those who bother with the facts. The best counters to these lies are modes of veridiction that do not espouse a truth, but draw on *logos* to generate provocative dialogues and artefacts from a life formed from affordances dishonestly depleted by post-truth politics. The problem of *parrhesia* turns up here in the courage it takes to be true to oneself when the truth is so thoroughly maligned. From what we are told

about him, Socrates stood out among his peers for having the courage to stage or enact the truth of what he thought and how he lived in the company of others.

The philosophical *parrhesia* practiced or enacted in the search that defined Socrates' life lived on in the Cynics, where the fit of what they believed (*logos*) with how they lived (*bios*) confronted the force of *nomos*, the law.⁴³ Already with Plato, an early follower of Socrates, there was the problem of how to reconcile the ethical relation of *logos* to *bios* governing an individual with *nomos*, the laws governing an individual's life in its relations with others. While Plato recommended an isomorphism between the individual soul and the city, the Cynics declared *bios* and *nomos* irreconcilable and gave primacy to the consistency of *logos* and *bios* in the individual over the claims of *nomos* and the city. The Cynics had no positive doctrine to espouse and, instead, used public platforms to denounce the institutions of government, to perform scandalous acts meant to shame the authorities, and to engage those authorities in what Foucault calls "provocative dialogue," which, he says, "derives from Socratic *parrhesia*."⁴⁴ Whereas the aim of the Socratic *parrhesia* was to expose the ignorance of Socrates' interlocutors, the Cynic practices of *parrhesia* aimed at hurting their interlocutor's pride. We want to consider whether there might be a place for something approximating Cynic practices of *parrhesia* in post-truth politics, today.

For we appear to find the unthinking, political *parrhesia* exemplified in the third speech at Orestes' trial in the fearless bluster passing as the free speech guaranteed by our modern democratic institutions. Ancient Greek democracy came undone quickly in the 5th and 4th century before the Christian era as the *demos* developed a strong preference for speakers who bolstered their cause by telling them early and often only what they wanted to hear. As a result, "it is not even possible to be heard in Athens if one does not parrot the *demos*' will," and the only speakers who have an audience are what Isocrates calls "reckless orators" and "comic poets."⁴⁵ "Hence," Isocrates concludes, "real *parrhêsia*, *parrhêsia* in its positive critical sense, does not exist where democracy exists."⁴⁶ In the long time from antiquity to the "post-truth" present, the situation has become much worse.

Today, the *demos* are those assembled on social media who deeply feel their exclusion from a world increasingly disposed to include others. They cast an evil eye on those they blame for heightening this feeling of exclusion, and they lionise those who do not just recognise their affective animus, but affirm it as legitimate and worthy of reparation. Their heroes are demagogues, reckless orators, using their bluster and unthinking outspokenness to animate the thoughtless crowd. Their outspokenness, heard by the many as clever and calculating, cannot be supported by argument (*logos*), and the consequences of this unthinking *parrhesia* for the politics of democracy are poisonous. Where are there Cynics, today, those inspired by Socrates' philosophical *parrhesia*, who might speak up to redress this injury to democracy?

They have largely become what Nietzsche called “priests” – clerics, career politicians, financial advisors, the professoriate – who long ago traded a care of the self that would prepare them to engage political life for a care of the self that prepares them to exit this life. Those who have not become priests or ideologues who promise to change the world, which is just another means of escaping it, can perhaps be found in the gadflies after Socrates' elenctic heart. Like those ancient Cynics, they deploy “provocative dialogue” and, even, scandalous acts to question the truth of manifestly false claims and to injure the pride of those who draw on those claims in the increasingly demagogic, mob rule that passes for democratic politics, today. This new cynicism, which we can trace back to elenctic Socratic *parrhesia*, stages the truth with provocative and scandalous salvos in the writings by investigative journalists and monologues by late-night comedians.

CONCLUSION

This new cynicism can also be found in the work of those Foucault might identify as *parrhesiastes* – artists and intellectuals – who have never given up on the truth, but who have never sought the truth in the discoveries of natural or social science or in conclusions drawn from those discoveries. They have, instead, found the courage to stage or enact truths in artefacts from an aesthetics of existence that

give life, *bios*, to what they have good reason, *logos*, to believe is true. These artifacts – artworks and other performative interventions – are fragile achievements, constantly negotiated in a world where the affordances for staging the truth are rare. In the elenctic Socratic *parrhesia*, the truth was hard fought, but always the same: we must not think we know what we do not know. For artists and thinkers, today, there is no one truth to uncover, but many truths to be staged with the chance affordances that turn up for staging those truths.

Those truths will be many not just to match the diversity in the forms of life inhabiting the planet, but because, emerging from so many different sites and so many different skills, the truths staged will be enacted in many different forms: a painting, a movie, or a manifesto, say, written by a young woman in Brooklyn or an old man in Prague. Additionally, these truths will be difficult and disarming precisely because there is no single standard to measure their achievement. Post-truth politics draws its strength from declaring the prevailing narrative false. It depends on a narrow account of the status quo that it decries as “fake news.” Artists and thinkers who challenge the very idea that there is such a narrow account deprive post-truth of the affordances it needs to enact itself. Because post-truth sees the world as black-and-white, anything that cannot be aligned with “us” or “them” threatens its epistemic economy. Today, artists and thinkers practicing critical *parrhesia* will be those staging truths that upset that economy. That is what makes those truths difficult and uncomfortable. The difficulty for these practitioners will be finding the affordances and, importantly, the environments for staging these truths.

For these truths will also be regional. One alethurgy will not be suited for every environment. The specific staging, the affordances turned up, the skills acquired and refined, the truths to be staged will be specific to environments where these stagings are enacted. Different truths in different settings will disturb the epistemic and political economy of the purveyors of post-truth and their followers. These environments will not be limited to physical sites. They will take shape wherever there are shared skills and histories and a shared sense of what affordances are

available, where those affordances turn up and how to use them to enact or achieve aims shared by those occupying that shared cultural site. Truths that are difficult in one environment may be benign in another. What would count as a staging of these truths will also certainly differ in one environment or another.

Michel Foucault's genealogies, for example, stage difficult truths about the health, delinquency, sexuality, and care of human subjects for readers of his books and auditors at his lectures. Those readers and auditors have shared these truths with diverse audiences through their own writings and teaching. Still, there are large populations of people and expansive environments where those truths never turn up or their achievements are ever felt. The silhouettes of Kara Walker are another example.⁴⁷ They stage difficult truths about race and gender drawing on allusions to the antebellum South. They are difficult differently in degree and in kind relative to the environments where they turn up, if they turn up, at all. Their staging requires special environments in galleries, museums, and books. Encounters with them have triggered virulent controversy with some artists and Black commentators criticising Walker for using her artworks to circulate hurtful stereotypes and others applauding Walker for making the unspeakable visible. It is fair to say that Walker's artworks stage truths that challenge status quo narratives about the enslavement of Black people and the post-truth fictions peddled to whitewash that racist brutality.⁴⁸

Two things need to be said about the truths staged by popular culture. First, they are freighted by the substructural economics that undermine their efforts. They circulate, by virtue of being popular and fetishised commodities, the very wrongs they aim to right. Second, in this way, they prop up the mainstream narratives that post-truth declares to be fake and, derisively, "woke." The post-truth attacks against DEI initiatives and LGBTQ+ rights are based on denying factual documentation of discrimination against under-resourced racial minorities and evidence of the value contributed by gender nonconforming and non-heteronormative lives. To the extent that these facts and that evidence are affirmed by pop-cultural truths, that culture serves the post-truth agenda. That the bend in the arc of history

toward truth is still evident to some holds out hope that the truths staged by a few avant-garde artists and thinkers can bend that arc toward a future where post-truth politics is truly *passé*.

In authoritarian regimes, where propaganda parades as politics, the courage to manifest the truth is met with violently repressive means. In so-called democratic regimes, the courage of the truth is policed by norms sedimented in the institutions constituting those regimes. The fearless speech of post-truth politics flaunts democratic norms to create a scandal and recruit unthinking collaborators to its cause. The truth it claims for itself derives from declaring false the truths that discover its nefarious schemes. The problem of *parrhesia*, here, that free and fearless post-truth politics comes with the democratic territory, must be met with a philosophical and artistic *parrhesia* enacted and fashioned by an avant-garde who, now more than ever, dare to stage truths for themselves and others that disquiet and disarm the many and the post-truth demagogues who serve them. Such an aesthetics of existence is rather rare and all the more distinctive, distinguished, and potentially efficacious for being unexpected.

People are disposed to think that philosophical *parrhesia* can have a positive political impact on the political *parrhesia* that manifests as post-truth in part because they esteem the life and writings of Michel Foucault and, in part, because they think there must be some solution to the post-truth impasse in modernist, political philosophical terms, but these two parts are entirely commensurable. Starting with *Discipline and Punish*, commentators tried to find in Foucault a critique of the state taking discipline to be a repressive mechanism of that apparatus. When the deployment of power introduced in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* challenged that critique, Foucault was criticised for not making a revolutionary enough contribution to the modernist, political philosophical cause, or his writings were reverse engineered to make his contribution more fitting than outwardly supposed. As I read him, Foucault wanted no part of either agenda. His genealogies do not recommend interventions, but map the terrain where such interventions might be staged. The terrain where debates about

post-truth are staged, today, is pock-marked with ideologies left and right. That terrain is populated by journalists who debate the truth in less than ideal speech situations. The best of these debates end up on the nightly news in “special segments” devoted to “serious” discussions of important issues.

My proposal, following what I take from Foucault, is that philosophical *parrhesia* in the form of avant-garde arts and philosophy has always worked beside the point of the mainstream and never attempted to engage that mainstream dialectically. My proposal depends on a distinction between the Socratic *elenchus* and Socratic *maieutic* from which Foucault’s sense of philosophical *parrhesia* derives. Everyone loves Socratic midwifery. Everyone wants philosophical *parrhesia* to be a midwife to the truth. I want philosophical *parrhesia* to be elenctic, a staging of the truth that the interlocutor does not know the truth and does not know that they do not know. The best response to post-truth is not another truth. It is a truth that has not yet been discovered as the truth. Édouard Manet was ridiculed in his day, now his paintings are lauded as political for refusing to accept the founding rules of the salon and bourgeois democracy. The political impact of Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1919) is still not fully appreciated. The political importance of Kara Walker’s art will not be fully appreciated for a century to come. That does not mean that *Les Femmes d’Alger* and Walker’s *A Subtlety* (2014) are not meaningful and politically efficacious now. Their impact is just felt by a minority of the population which has turned its back on the stupidity of post-truth for good reasons.

As stated above, the insistence on a solution to the current post-truth impasse is part of the post-truth logic. The purveyors of post-truth want to be targeted so as to emerge as the aggrieved victims and to perpetuate their evidently bankrupt gambit. The point of my essay is to eschew that engagement, to encourage the avant-garde to proceed as it has always done, with disregard for the mainstream, keeping to itself, producing work that feeds and nourishes those who have likewise turned their back on the mainstream, who have not lost sight of the truth and who stage truths to fill the field razed by post-truth politics and the “pundits” who unwittingly contribute to the blight. None of this will change the minds of the

sheep flocking to the post-truth herd or hoping to lead parts of that herd astray with promises of “a new way.” None of that is of a concern for the philosophical *parrhesia* advanced above, which is busy making artworks and writing philosophy that chafes against the grain.

Foucault says that the philosophical *parrhesia* of the *Laches*, which he does not call *elenchus*, leads to an aesthetics of existence, while the philosophical *parrhesia* of the *Alcibiades*, which he does not name *maieutic*, leads to a metaphysics of the soul. Metaphysics will certainly be music to the ears of the post-truth crowd, which will declare it the soundtrack of snowflakes. A commitment to an elenctic aesthetics of existence might leave the purveyors of post-truth indifferent, but perhaps the indifference of that aesthetics of existence to the claims of post-truth can galvanise the resolve of those with the courage to tell the truth in an environment where the value of the truth is maligned, but not yet irrelevant. The courageous can be cheered by the cynicism of journalists whose writings stab at the pride of post-truth, but they can become truly fortified by artists and thinkers who posit truths where the truth is a fragile achievement, not freely given, but fiercely enacted and staged to show that we are better (more attractive, says Socrates in *Alcibiades*) when we seek what we do not know, rather than suppose there is nothing to know. The truths so staged derive from lives led by the artists and thinkers who enact them, and when those truths and lives are consistent with one another, they can achieve an aesthetics that can be a model for the existence of those who still have the courage to tell the truth.

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current book project is tentatively titled “Aesthetics and Embodiments:
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NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001. Unlike the lectures at the Collège de France, the course at Berkeley was attended by a group of between fifteen and twenty auditors. Pearson taped the presentations and met with Foucault in office hours to check the references and to clarify gaps in the recording. A transcript of the course, printed and spiral-bound by Pearson, circulated among friends starting in the year after Foucault's death in 1984 until Semiotext(e) agreed to publish it twenty-five years later.
2. Oxford English Dictionary. 3rd edition <https://www.oed.com/>.
3. Steve Tesich, "The Watergate Syndrome: A Government of Lies." *The Nation* (January 6, 1992, 12–14).
4. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Trans. Paul Patton, Indiana University Press, 1995.
5. See <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.
6. See Ralph Keyes, *The Post-truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. St. Martin's Press, 2004; Stuart Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019; and Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou, *Post-Truth, Fake News and Democracy: Mapping the Politics of Falsehood*. 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2024.
7. Henry Georg Liddell, Robert Scott and Sir Henry Stewart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
8. Henry Georg Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 6th edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869.
9. The verb *eirô* itself has three distinct meanings only two of which are extant in the ancient Greek texts. One means "to say," another means to string together like beads in a necklace or, in a speech, like words that follow one another in "a continuous running style;" for the third, not actually extant, we are referred by the lexicons to the Epic verb *ereô*, "to ask" (Liddell, Scott and Jones).
10. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 22–24, 91–107.
11. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 61.
12. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 62.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 64.
15. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 65.
16. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 66.
17. *Ibid*.
18. Foucault does not note that in what are regularly called the early dialogues Plato never represents Socrates telling the truth to his interlocutors. Instead, Socrates is represented as leading that interlocutor to realise a truth himself, namely, that he does not know what he says he knows. Socratic parrhesia in these dialogues, then, is not a speech, but a conclusion arrived at in a dialogue that Socrates' interlocutor accepts reluctantly. Writing at about the same time, Gregory Vlastos termed this dialogue "the Socratic elenchus," about which see more below (Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1, 1983, 27–58).
19. See Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1980 – 1981*. Trans. Graham Burchell, London: Picador, 2019; *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981 – 1982*. Trans. Graham Burchell, London: Picador, 2005; *Speaking the Truth About Oneself: Lectures at Victoria University, Toronto, 1982*. Trans. Daniel Louis Wyche.

- Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021; *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982 – 1983*. Trans. Graham Burchell, London: Picador, 2011; and *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of the History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley, London: Random House, 1986.
20. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.
 21. *Plato, Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper, London: Hackett, 1997. Both dialogues are included in *Platonis Opera, recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit Iohannes Burnet, Tomus V*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922.
 22. Cooper, *Complete Works*, vi.
 23. Collection Budé (Collection des Universités de France), is an editorial collection comprising the Greek and Latin classics up to the middle of the 6th century published by Les Belles Lettres and sponsored by the Association Guillaume Budé. At Berkeley, Foucault arrived for each class meeting with a short stack of Loeb's.
 24. Scholars, today, debate whether it was written very early or very late. A reference to possible conflict on the otherwise insignificant Aegean island of Peparethus (Alcibiades 116d), which only erupted in the late 360s BCE argues for the later date.
 25. *Plato, Alcibiades I*. Trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1927; *Plato, Alcibiades*. Trans. D. S. Hutchinson, in *Plato, Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper.
 26. Incidentally, there is a reference to Euripides' *Hippolytus* at Alcibiades 113c.
 27. In antiquity, the dialogue was given the subtitle *Peri Anthrôpou Physikôs: Maieutikos* or "On the Nature of Man: Midwifery."
 28. *Plato, Alcibiades*, 120a–124b.
 29. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 37. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983 – 1984*. Trans. Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 6.
 30. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 5.
 31. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982 – 1983*. Trans. Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
 32. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 7.
 33. See Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus" and the collections of Vlastos' essays, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1991; and *Socratic Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
 34. See my "Socrates' Refutation of Apollo," *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 8.2 (2014, 40–56).
 35. The dialogues counted as elenctic include *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Gorgias*, *Hippias Minor*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras* and Book 1 of *Republic*.
 36. See my "Certainty and Consistency in the Socratic Elenchus." In *Does Socrates Have a Method?*, ed. Gary A. Scott, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 2001, 266–80.
 37. *Plato, Meno* 86b.
 38. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 92 ff.
 39. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*. Trans. Robert Hurley, London: Pantheon Books, 1985.
 40. See my "For the Love of Boys." *Foucault Studies* 17 (April 2014, 213–231).
 41. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 36–57.
 42. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 157–176.

43. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 104–105.
44. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 119–122.
45. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 82. Isocrates, “On the Peace.” Trans. George Norlin, in *Isocrates*, vol. 2, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1968, para. 3, 14. On comedy, Foucault quotes Werner Jaeger, “Comedy was produced by democracy as an antidote to its own overdose of liberty, thereby outdoing its own excesses, and extending parrhêsia, its vaunted freedom of speech, to subjects which are usually tabu even in a free political system.... Comedy was the censorship of Athens” (*Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1. Trans. Gilbert Highet, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945, 364–365).
46. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 83.
47. There are many others. In place of a long list of writers and artists, we can point to a feature that distinguishes the truths they stage: they make you stop and think without knowing what to think.
48. See Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2015, 17–67. See also Karen C. C. Dalton, Michael D. Harris and Lowry Stokes Sims, “The Past Is Prologue but Is Parody and Pastiche Progress? A Conversation.” In *Stereotypes Subverted? Or for Sale? Special Issue, International Review of African American Art* 14.3 (1997): 17–29; Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004; Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; Ian Berry English, “This Is Not about the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker.” In *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Ian Berry English, Vivian Patterson and Mark Reinhardt, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003, 141–167; all cited by Harris.

**all this fearless speaking
is really fearful screaming:
diogenes, foucault and
the american crisis of bad
parrhesia**

christopher schwartz

INTRODUCTION

I am writing this in the summer of 2024, and the specter of polarisation is looming darkly over the United States. While the primary engine driving the discord are structural factors – ranging from the ownership dynamics of contemporary mass media to the misuse of artificial intelligence – rhetorical factors provide the fuel. Michel Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* offers us a way to articulate and understand those rhetorical factors.

Parrhesia is originally an ancient Cynic term typically understood to connote

“fearless speech.” The Cynics conceived it as agonism, i.e., provocation, confrontation, and adversarialness. Millennia later, Foucault interprets *parrhesia* more dynamically, and crucially, he also discerns how it can turn rotten.¹ As I interpret him, “bad” *parrhesia* can be thought of as a reduction of fearless speech to agonism, i.e., equating fearlessness *with* adversarialness. Put more simply, fearless speaking goes bad when it becomes less about being genuinely fearless and more about the appearance of it.

The bad *parrhesiast*, then, is a sort of pseudo-Cynic. Pseudo, because when the Cynics are understood correctly, the intention behind their agonism was ultimately pro-social. Parrhesia goes wrong when this point is missed, distorted, or simply not cared about.

With this conceptual framework in hand, my central argument in this paper is that bad *parrhesia* pervades both the Right- and the Left-wing today. To already be absolutely clear at this early juncture, when properly understood and correctly wielded, it can be the lifeblood of democracy. The problem is its corruption. The solution, though, is terrifying: we must end our increasingly rigid commitment to agonism.

What is really at stake here is not even speaking per se, but *what it means to be fearless*, and it is paramount that we expand our conception of it beyond sheer adversarialness. We Americans must become fearless about fearlessness. Specifically, I propose that we consider four kinds of fearlessness in addition to the agonistic form we know all too well: *fearless silence*, *fearless listening*, *fearless curiosity*, and *irenic fearless speaking*. The last of these – to speak fearlessly in a manner that seeks consensus and harmony – will be the most difficult for us to understand and embrace, as at first glance it seems contradictory and even in its own way very dangerous.

Different stakeholders in the United States today will have different relationships to these other kinds of fearlessness. In my view, any or all four of these are ethically

tenable for members of the general public to take on wholesale. It is a different story for journalists. While they can also engage in all four of these other forms of fearlessness, they must ultimately prioritise fearless speaking. Yet, they must also do so in a way that strikes a balance between agonism and irenism. More precisely, they must be sensitive to the needs of their historical circumstances, and right now, the need is for more irenic *parrhesia* than its agonistic counterpart.

What did I mean when I suggested a moment ago that irenic *parrhesia* might seem, in its own way, very dangerous? Amidst the storm of agonism roaring all around us today, these four forms of fearlessness may seem to fall afoul of Martin Niemöller's poem, "First they came..." Niemöller can be interpreted as describing the failure to be agonistic against the fascism of 1930s-40s Germany. He recounts how the Nazis rounded up various groups for enslavement and extermination, one after another – communists, socialists, trade unionists, Jews – and each time he "said nothing" because he was not a member of any of them. Eventually, "they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me." In light of his warning, we may rightfully wonder whether, if we are fearlessly silent, do we not let evil win? If we fearlessly listen or are fearlessly curious, of what utility are we? And most of all, if we do not shout louder than the enemy, what is the point of speaking at all?

It requires intuition to discern the terrible truth of our present situation: all of our fearless speaking has really been fearful screaming, and that screaming is bringing us perilously close to our own authoritarian crisis. We must be brave. We must stop screaming. There is no other way.

1.1. OVERVIEW

The deterioration of public discourse in the United States is firmly established. Conceptualisations of our discordant rhetoric have varied widely, e.g., our discourse has become "radicalized (sic)," "hyper-partisan," "tribalistic," it has fallen prey to "siege mentality" and evinces a feeling of "circling the wagons," and more.² In my view, these ways of thinking about the present crisis are valuable,

but they tend to lack the necessary philosophical precision to really capture what may be happening *beneath* the rhetoric. This is why I suggest we instead consider bad *parrhesia* as an interpretative framework, as it enables us to discern that the problem in American public discourse today is that our rhetoric has become deeply fearful.³ It is crucial that we discern the influence of fear in our discourse, for it has been hidden, voiced with the pitch and cadence of fearlessness.

A technical note is needed here before proceeding. In order to discuss *parrhesia*, it is important to distinguish between three rough-hewn roles: (i) the *parrhesiast* (the would-be fearless speaker), (ii) the recipient (the object of their fearless speech), and (iii) the audience (the beneficiary of their speech). While the *parrhesiast* speaks *about* the recipient, directing their speech *to* or *at* them, they do so *for the sake of* the audience. In practice, though, these distinctions can be imprecise and fluid. Take for example Tucker Carlson, whom I will be discussing at length below as an example of a bad *parrhesiast*. Schematically, he portrays himself as speaking truth to an immoral American elite (his recipient) on behalf of a moral American everyman (his audience), but concretely, he actually addresses the latter.

Now, it is impossible to separate Foucault's conception of *parrhesia*, both "good" and "bad," from his viewpoint that both society and the self are ultimately crystallisations of power relations.⁴ In a Foucauldian framework, *parrhesia* is good and authentic when it is sensitive to, and sincere about, the power relations that inform the act of speaking itself – which is to say, the deep and often unseen systemic conditions that have influenced who plays the roles of *parrhesiast*, recipient, and audience – and it goes wrong when they are either insensitive to, and/or insincere about, these relations.

Foucault specifically identifies two varieties of bad fearless speech: (a) the reckless type, in which the *parrhesiast* is voicing their thoughts about their target without regard for power relations, and (b) the duplicitous type, in which the *parrhesiast* is not what they seem, for they are actually camouflaging the status quo in a veneer of boldness. Hence, the reckless *parrhesiast* is such because they either fail to see,

or they forget, that they exist in the same web of power relations as their target, and so they lose their compassion, while the duplicitous *parrhesiast* sees the web and manipulates it.

It is tempting to further pose the duplicitous *parrhesiast* as someone who is themselves a member of the elite, i.e., they are the spider at the heart of the web. However, as I understand Foucault, such an interpretation would overlook the infinite relativity of power. A *parrhesiast* is duplicitous not because they are factually a member of an actual elite (although to be sure, like Carlson, they may very well be so). Rather, a *parrhesiast* is duplicitous when they meet two conditions: (i) they know they have more power in a *given situation* than either their speech's recipient and/or their audience – so to speak, they are “elite” relative to the other participants according to the power structures at play in the given moment of discourse – and (ii) their speech is intended to dissimulate or otherwise distract from their relative power. The duplicitous *parrhesiast* can thus be the abusive parent who denies their child's pain by portraying themselves as the unloved one, or the local male cop who insists the female rape victim had it coming because of the provocative clothing she was wearing, or the inveterate bully who asserts that the other kid is responsible for the fist fight because they were the ones who punched first. I could go on, as unfortunately, examples of duplicitous *parrhesia* are endemic to everyday life.

Although Foucault's distinction is certainly sound, I argue that bad *parrhesia* is more complex than what even he suggests, for fearless speech can also be (c) unjust. The unjust *parrhesiast*, either wittingly or unwittingly, sincerely attempts to speak truth to either the lesser powerful, the powerful in principle but not in fact, or the powerless. The distinction here is not that the just *parrhesiast* fearlessly speaks upward, at those higher in the hierarchy, while the unjust *parrhesiast* fearlessly speaks downward, at those lower in the hierarchy. Rather, the distinction here is that the unjust *parrhesiast* profoundly misjudges the capacities, constraints, and character of their recipient.

In my view, the misjudgment of the recipient's character is the root cause of *parrhesiastic* injustice. Such misjudgment typically involves conceiving power as an essential feature that some people inherently possess by dint of their nominal position within a hierarchy. Conceiving power in this way implies that people *are* powerful rather than *have* power. It follows that someone who *is* powerful cannot themselves ever experience powerlessness, and hence they can never experience injustice – including from the *parrhesiast*. Indeed, the unjust *parrhesiast* engages in a double injustice, one metaphysical, one concrete: metaphysical, in that they deny the humanity of the one whom they are confronting, and concrete, in that as a consequence, the restitution they seek has a higher chance of itself being wrongful.

I should note that *grey parrhesia* also exists and is very much a challenge in its own right, both philosophically and as a contributing factor to the rhetorical crisis rocking the United States. However, because my focus in this paper is on bad *parrhesia*, I will unfortunately need to explore this topic elsewhere. Suffice it to say for now that *grey parrhesia* mixes good and bad *parrhesia*. This can happen in any number of ways. For example, the unjust *parrhesiast* may not have the metaphysical commitments I have outlined here, but simply be biased or mistaken. Another potential example, albeit a more fraught one, is hate speech. The hate speaker may be fearless in one way, i.e., by sincerely confronting authorities or a mainstream consensus that is actively opposed to them, while the content of their speech is not fearless in another way, i.e., by promulgating essentialising narratives about entire demographic groups, thereby perpetuating injustice. The grey aspects of hate speech can also work the other way, for good fearless speech can be labeled “hate speech” precisely in order to silence it. We see this phenomenon in the former Soviet Union, such as the Kyrgyz Republic, wherein a law ostensibly intended to combat hate speech has been used to censor social-political critics.⁵

Back on track. To recall from above, I argue that what Foucault identified as bad *parrhesia*, and what poisons and distorts our public discourse today, is at root

a perverted form of the original Cynical model. Let me put it this way: fearless speech that is adversarial in character has come to be valorised in contemporary American discourse, such that as a matter of culture – especially Internet culture, which seems to dominate American society – we expect the *parrhesiast* to be a rhetorical gunslinger. The American *parrhesiast* is transgressive, remorseless, deadly, shooting down the powerful with the discursive bullets of truth.

By aligning bad *parrhesia* with the Cynical model, I believe it also becomes possible to see more clearly the need for, and possible forms of, a more expansive, democratic vision of *parrhesia*, and fearlessness in general. Moving beyond the present crisis of bad *parrhesia* will require recovering a more participatory, community-oriented conception of truth-telling. This is why I think that of the four other forms of fearlessness I laid out above and will discuss below, irenic *parrhesia*, difficult to articulate and seemingly paradoxical though the concept may be, is key.

1.2. PROCEDURE

This paper will proceed as follows. I will first delve into *parrhesia*, clarifying its good forms from its bad ones. In the spirit of the Cynics, I will illustrate bad *parrhesia* with anecdotes pulled from the headlines and my own personal life. Following this, I will discuss the proposed four other kinds of fearlessness and their relationship to the American general public. I will then close this paper with what I believe fearless speaking by American journalists needs to look like today.

2. FEARLESS SPEECH

This section is dedicated to explicating the differences between good and bad *parrhesia*. I will start with *parrhesia*'s original formulation by the Cynics, then move to its formulation by Foucault. With these in hand, I will then turn to the subtleties of its bad expression.

2.1. CYNICAL PARRHESIA

For Diogenes of Sinope and his fellow Cynics, fearless speaking effected what Darren Gardner calls an “immanent social critique.”⁶ They understood fearlessness specifically as provocation, expressing it as an antics-filled form of asceticism that was by turns sarcastic to the point of absurdity, and rude to the point of aggressive transgression. For example, the couple Crates of Thebes and Hipparchia of Maronea had sexual intercourse in full view of the public, while Diogenes lived on the streets with stray dogs, slept in a bathtub, and confronted people with a lamp, shoving it in their faces to see whether they were “honest.”

“Honesty” had many levels of meaning for the Cynics, but one meaning in particular had ultimate priority: it was the civilised rather than the uncivilised who were living a life of absurdity, aggressive transgression, and most of all, self-deception. In what way were the civilised being absurd, transgressive and self-deceptive? By living a life against nature.

An important subtlety often missed about the Cynics is that while Diogenes and his fellow “dogs” opposed society, they were not necessarily anti-social. It is highly likely that at least some of the movement’s members enjoyed the provocativeness of the *parrhesiast* lifestyle for its own sake, but for most of the Cynics it served a veiled pro-social purpose. A telling moment in their movement’s history occurred when Diogenes was asked about his citizenship: he replied by identifying neither with Sinope nor “*apolis*,” i.e., without a society, but with “*kosmopolis*.”⁷ As I interpret him, Diogenes may very well have seen himself as a member of a society, but one that encompassed and undergirded the tiny, frail, and egocentric societies of humanity.

We see indications of this stance in the later Epictetus, a Stoic who revered Diogenes and actively drew inspiration from him. Epictetus once remarked that he was unafraid of exile: “Where can they send me? Nowhere outside the world, since wherever I end up, the sun will be there, as will the moon and the stars. There will still be dreams, birds of augury, and other means of staying in touch with the gods.”⁸ He did not fear being cast out of the *polis* because he realised he

was just cast into the *kosmopolis*, where all of us truly belong anyway.

Diogenes' *kosmopolis* was not an airy abstraction, but the corporeally and physically real. It was the biological instincts that human institutions and norms denied and suppressed. It was the vast natural environment that surrounded and succored human society, but which humanity in its folly had twisted and bent into buildings and tools. The Cynical *parrhesiast* was therefore not merely a critic or a punk, but an evangelist for the universe, prodding their fellow human beings to take humanity's proper place in the civilisation of being.

2.2. FOUCAULDIAN *PARRHESIA*

Both the Foucauldian and the Cynical model of *parrhesia* intuit the importance of individual fearlessness in collective well-being, but where the Cynics conceptualise it as confrontation and asceticism, Foucault understands that it *can also be*, and *often needs to be*, empathetic, sympathetic, and actively engaged in society. He frames fearless speech as having a constitutive role in democracy, and his viewpoint expands beyond his Cynical fore-bearers' focus on adversarialness.

Note that Foucault's insights into *parrhesia* are underpinned by his understanding of power relations as the source of both individual identity and societal structures. He proposes that the self and society are not static entities but are instead formed and sustained through power dynamics. Consider the current conflict surrounding sex and gender identity. While perhaps personally sympathetic to one side, as a philosopher Foucault would very likely perceive the rhetorical battles being fought over this issue as ultimately being less about the dichotomous philosophical oppositions portrayed by the Right and the Left's loudest speakers, and more about the complex ways power shapes individual and collective markers of identity *on both sides* of the dispute.

So, what is "good" – which is really to say, authentic – *parrhesia* in a Foucauldian framework? It is not merely about speaking truth to power, but also involves a critical assessment of when and how truth-telling can be most effective and

ethical. Good *parrhesia* is thus characterised by a willingness to engage with, and challenge, societal norms and institutions while simultaneously being mindful of the potential consequences for both individuals and the collective. The good *parrhesiast* is compassionate, but not to the point of being immobilised. As well as they can, they strive to strike the right balance between when to critique and when to be silent, and in which ways.

It is also important to note that Foucault highlights the importance of self-care as a form of resistance, not just fearless speaking. Self-care for Foucault does not mean withdrawal from social-political life, but rather a re-connection with the true self as a basis for more authentic and effective political engagement. And to be clear, the true self is not the one that exists Möbius strip-like with society, but is our baseline materiality. Hence, the reconnection with the self that occurs in self-care should be understood as a non-literal version of Epictetus' exile: it is re-embodiment, and as such, it is a curative to the disembodiment wrought by the power relations encoded in the "I" of the self and the "We" of society.

I feel it is important to highlight this aspect of Foucault's thinking because Foucauldian *parrhesia*, like its Cynical predecessor but in a subtler way, is as much about transforming oneself as it is about transforming society. Put in Cynical terms, it is necessary to depart the polis for the kosmopolis, but neither is the departure necessarily and always *literal*, nor is the kosmopolis inherently antithetical to the polis – very much to the contrary. And to gesture ahead, these notions will undergird the four other forms of fearlessness that I am proposing.

Back on track: to engage in good *parrhesia* as understood by Foucault, the speaker must engage in a critical examination of (i) the motives behind their desire to speak truth, and (ii) of the power relations their speaking incarnates, even if their speaking is intended to contest those power relations. Put simply, the would-be fearless speaker must consider to the best of their ability not just the content of what they will say, but also the context in which it will be said, and the effects it may have.

In form but not in spirit, Foucauldian *parrhesia* is thus the opposite of Cynical *parrhesia*. It is actively engaged with and in society; it takes seriously, and is sensitive to, the shifting sands of identity, and does not reject the desert as just a mirage; yet it still strives to challenge the status quo, although not through social-political renunciation, but by fostering a more inclusive and dialogic social-political culture. The Foucauldian *parrhesiast* does not see themselves as wielding truth like a weapon against the powerful. They understand that power is always mutating, and they are not seeking to emerge victorious from a gun duel, but instead to contribute to the well-being and freedom of speaker, their recipient, and their audience.

2.3. BAD PARRHESIA

According to Foucault, bad *parrhesia* generally occurs in two forms: either the speaker masks the status quo in the tone of fearlessness, or they voice the contents of their mind without regard for others. The adjective “bad” thus serves as a gloss for speaking fearlessly, recklessly, or duplicitously. This is a good start for understanding how *parrhesia* can be shameful or harmful, but it is only a start. I will also discuss how *parrhesia* can be unjust, as well as how all three forms of bad *parrhesia* – which I suspect are by no means the only forms of it – can, and often do, overlap or feed into each other.

Before I dive in, let me outline the bad *parrhesiast* as such: they are, so to speak, pseudo-Cynics who wield truth claims like a gun, either because they do not know how to wield such claims properly, or because they know full well what they are doing. Not only this, but what at root really distinguishes the good *parrhesiast* from the bad is how the two relate to fear, with the one ultimately having a positive relationship with it, the other a negative relationship.

Solidarity also plays an important tonal role. Where the good *parrhesiast* seeks the betterment of the collective – and in as maximal an understanding of that collective as possible – the bad *parrhesiast* is either unmindful of the collective’s

needs, seeks to undermine those needs, or as I will argue here, speaks tribalistically, prioritising *their* particular collective's needs over and against all others. The bad *parrhesiast* can therefore either (a) get caught up in playing the role of “enfant terrible truth-teller from the outside, whose only affiliation is the non-place of ‘kosmopolis’ where there is nature but not politics”⁹ – in which case they are being reckless; (b) they feign having solidarity with their audience – in which case they are being duplicitous; and/or (c) they actively reject having solidarity with their recipient, thereby dividing the world into allies and enemies – in which case they are being unjust.

The assertional nature of the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims must also be reckoned with. For starters, it has become widespread in recent years to invoke Harry Frankfurt's concept of “bullshit” and Stephen Colbert's notion of “truthiness” to describe what it is about disinformation that can make it so persuasive.¹⁰ Now, I do think these are apt applications of these ideas; I also think disinformation is a form of bad *parrhesia*, so *mutatis mutandis* these are apt for what the bad *parrhesiast* does, as well. However, I do think the role of truth in bad *parrhesia* should be parsed, in at least two ways.

First, the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims may be objectively accurate, argumentatively sincere or, per my purposes here, genuinely fearless, but they may also not have some or all of these qualities. Broadly, when they have these qualities, yet are engaging in bad *parrhesia*, they probably can be categorised as being reckless, and when they do not have these qualities, they can be categorised as duplicitous. Unjust bad *parrhesia* is a more complicated phenomenon, as the unjustly bad *parrhesiast* may be *both* accurate and inaccurate, sincere and insincere, fearless and fearful. The bad *parrhesiast*, then, can be speak truthfully yet ill-formedly (reckless), ill-targetedly (unjust), or in a manner manipulative of the audience's biases (duplicitous), or some mix of these.

Second and relatedly, there is also the issue of when the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims give voice to genuine subjective perceptions, i.e., that they are *subjectively*

accurate, as opposed to being *objectively* accurate; and not only this, but also are subjectively *advocative*. We see this frequently in disinformation and conspiracy theories, the rhetorics of which often entail an element of empowerment, enjoining the audience to “think for themselves” or hold to their viewpoint on a given issue.¹¹ This poses a real devil of an ethical issue, as while there is nothing inherently wrong in pushing for subjective truths, it can be done at the exclusion of other considerations.¹² Put differently, to paraphrase the saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, what is true and false are *not* in the eyes of the audience, but they are also *not* in the eyes of the audience, as well. Nevertheless, as will be clear when I discuss Carlson below, I do hold that there is a meaningful distinction still to be drawn between the subjective and objective dimensions of reality.

2.3.1. RECKLESS *PARRHESIA*

At least three kinds of reckless *parrhesia* can be conceptualised within a Foucauldian framework: egotistical, egoistical, and philosophical. The first two are rooted in a lack of proper fear on the part of the *parrhesiast*; the third has a more complicated relationship to fear. Also note that these can occur at the same time, such that the reckless *parrhesiast* can be egotistical or egoistical *and* philosophical.

When *parrhesia* is reckless because of egotism, it is innocent, which is to say, it is because the speaker genuinely does not realise the harm they may be doing to their recipient. However, when it is because of egoism, the speaker is focusing on their own needs and desires at the conscious expense of the recipient; they may even take pleasure in transgression for its own sake. In both, the bad *parrhesiast* lacks fear in the sense of wishing to avoid causing unnecessary or excessive harm to their recipient, but in egotism, they are just unaware or immature, while in egoism, they do not care.

Philosophically, reckless *parrhesia* is different from the other two, for it is not a function of emotion, but of conceptualisation. Specifically, it arises from conflating speaking *freely* with speaking *fearlessly*.¹³ While free and fearless speech

are connected and are equally valuable, they are not the same thing. They entail different conditions for the speaker, free speech *external* conditions, fearless speech *internal* conditions: speaking freely primarily entails the cultivation of non-censorship within society, while speaking fearlessly entails the cultivation of spiritual qualities within the individual, such as depth, honesty, sensitivity, and bravery.

My point here is that the presence or lack of freedom does not inherently make an act of speech fearless. Of course, speaking freely in the face of censorship can usually be rightly considered speaking fearlessly; this is why it is easy, even natural, to conflate the two kinds of speech.

This does, though, lead to the uncomfortable topic of hate speech. On the one hand, hate speech may be rightly considered speaking fearlessly (at least, in a banal if still not non-trivial sense) in the face of censorship. On the other hand, many believe that the content of hate speech *should* be censored. In other words, suppressing hate speech may be the right thing to do, but by doing so, the hate speaker may be placed into the position of being a fearless speaker.

To recall from above, I consider hate speech to be a possible form of grey *parrhesia*. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, I mention it here because it is pertinent to an important case of philosophically reckless *parrhesia* that is happening right now: Elon Musk's decision to "return free speech" to Twitter (now X) following his purchase of the platform. Concretely, this has looked like either restoring a moderation-free form of online discourse which has not been seen in the West for the last several decades,¹⁴ and/or actively permitting hate speech to flourish on the platform.¹⁵

Obviously, I do not have privileged access to Musk's mind, but it does seem to me that he has conflated the free and fearless speech. His platform's users may be able to speak freely – or at least, more freely than under the previous ownership – but per the terms I have laid out here, that does not necessarily mean they are

speaking fearlessly.

2.3.2. DUPLICITOUS *PARRHESIA*

Although duplicitous *parrhesia* can be difficult to discern in practice due to its manipulative nature, it is easy to grasp conceptually: the speaker is not really the fearless truth-teller they present themselves to be. More fundamentally, they manipulate their audience's fears, and are themselves afraid of being found out. The aforementioned Carlson is a textbook case: a wealthy, Christian man of European descent who, prior to his ouster from Fox News in April 2023,¹⁶ sat atop an enormous agenda-setting apparatus. And yet, both while at Fox News and since, he positions himself as a *parrhesiast* defending the interests of the everyman by speaking truth to the elite. This elite, largely comprised of social-political liberals and social-political conservatives not aligned with Donald Trump, is variously in thrall to a deep state, a uni-party, or a cabal of pedophiles.

Immediately, it is tempting to ascribe duplicity as a function of the *parrhesiast*'s demographic background. Carlson's audience is like Carlson himself, largely been composed of viewers who are upper-income, male, and identify as strongly conservative,¹⁷ often even more than other Fox News watchers,¹⁸ and they tend to be of European descent and/or with a Christian heritage.¹⁹ These generally are also the demographics of the American elite.

Yet, duplicitous *parrhesia* is not about demographics, but about phenomenology. It preys on how the audience *experiences* themselves and their world – and how they interpret their experience.

Carlson's audience feels out of step with mainstream American society. To be sure, there is some credence to their feeling, for as younger Millennials and Zoomers rise in influence, the United States is indeed gradually becoming more demographically diverse and socially-politically liberal.²⁰ However, the country as a whole, despite its many internal divisions, actually remains largely centrist.²¹ Carlson's duplicity can be found in two things: (a) how he does not reassure

his audience of this fact, but instead reinforces their sense of themselves as the “silent majority” – even though that is not who they are;²² and (b) how he directs their feelings of isolation toward the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement,” according to which the shadowy establishment is actively seeking to “replace” whites and Christians with “preferable” demographics.²³ He thus not only construes their subjective viewpoint *as an objective reality*, but he also *poisons* it with distortions and falsehoods.

Carlson’s October 2022 interview with Kanye West demonstrates his duplicitous *parrhesia*. I will focus here on two key points from their conversation: when West expressed feeling constrained by supposedly not being able to voice his Right-wing political opinions in his private and professional circles, and when he gave his reasoning behind wearing a shirt with the slogan, “White Lives Matter.” Regarding his feeling constrained, West explained that he felt pressure from intimates and colleagues in the entertainment industry not to express his support for Trump publicly. As for “White Lives Matter,” West explained that he interpreted the slogan as a self-evident statement that white American lives are not inconsequential compared to the lives of other races in the United States.

Extreme care is warranted here before proceeding, specifically regarding West’s support for Trump. It would be easy to fall into the trap of accusing him of being a “race traitor.” Some citizens of the United States of African descent have been shifting their support away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party,²⁴ and that is their sacred right.

While West’s claim that the entertainment industry has overall become politically liberal is merited,²⁵ the extent of its liberalism, to say nothing of its sincerity, much less its dogmatism, are all debatable. Yet, he portrayed his impression of that industry as sincerely and extremely liberal as an objective fact. As for “White Lives Matter,” if we are charitable to West, he was either gravely mistaken, or making a decision to interpret those words as he saw fit. Nevertheless, the historical reality is that “White Lives Matter” is not a statement of self-evident

fact but a white supremacist slogan. It emerged in 2015 and gained traction among the Far Right during the violent protests that erupted in 2021 in response to death of George Floyd.²⁶ The slogan has been a key rhetorical component of the Great Replacement: its coiners and proponents openly admit to using it to raise awareness of a supposed “white genocide” and to build support for a white ethno-state.²⁷

To be sure, West and Carlson shared the agenda of critiquing Left-wing identity politics, and West’s worldview in general aligned with the worldview of Carlson’s audience. Obviously, these were major factors in West’s decision to be interviewed by Carlson. Nevertheless, beneath the surface there were deep rhetorical and power imbalances at play between them.

On the rhetorical front, as the interviewer and platform-provider, Carlson had a responsibility to challenge West’s claims and provide context for his statements. By allowing West to speak without pushback on the credibility of his claims, Carlson effectively amplified West’s views to an audience predisposed to agree with them. Looking ahead to the question of journalism in the current crisis: good *parrhesia*, especially in a journalistic context, should develop the speaker’s credibility first, whereas bad *parrhesia* avoids taking responsibility. Moreover, good *parrhesia* in a journalistic context confronts the audience’s biases, whereas bad *parrhesia* confirms them.

With respect to power, it is also important to note that West, in expressing what appeared to be his sincerely held beliefs, did take on significant personal and professional risk, knowing he would likely face backlash. There is thus a real case to be made that he demonstrated reckless, or perhaps grey, *parrhesia*.

At the same time, Carlson misconstrued him as a fellow outsider, even though both were members of the cultural elite. Although West did eventually lose his stature in society due to his viewpoints,²⁸ what is key to underline here is that while he was an elite, Carlson exploited him. Authentic *parrhesia* seeks to uplift

individual and collective alike, whereas duplicitious *parrhesia* seeks to exploit one or some for the benefits of oneself or others. The tragic irony that Carlson was a white man exploiting West the black man makes his bad *parrhesia* all the more vile, for Carlson risked little of himself and amplified his own status, while the latter risked and lost much.

All in all, Carlson's interview of West used the pitch and cadence of truth-telling to bypass standards of rigorous, courageous, and ethical discourse that are as much *parrhesiast* as they are journalistic. He sought ideological amplification, not public enlightenment.

2.3.3. UNJUST *PARRHESIA*

There is a crucial difference between describing someone as *engaging in oppression* versus describing them as *an oppressor*, the former being an attribution of a state or action, the latter an attribution of essence. The unjust *parrhesiast* thinks in terms of essences. They speak according to a rigid oppressor/oppressed logic, approaching the world not in terms of patterns of oppression, but of two tribes: the oppressors and the oppressed.

In more precise philosophical terms, the unjust *parrhesiast* makes two missteps, one diagnostic, the other metaphysical: (i) wittingly or unwittingly, they speak truth to the lesser powerful, the powerful in principle but not in fact, or the powerless, and (ii) consciously or unconsciously, they conceive power as an essential feature that some people inherently possess by dint of their nominal position within a hierarchy. What makes the latter a misstep is that conceiving power in this way implies that those ascribed the status of being powerful cannot themselves by definition ever experience powerlessness, and hence they can never experience unfairness or injustice. History demonstrates that this is untrue.

To be as clear as possible, when power is properly understood, *all of us*, regardless of where we exist in this or that specific hierarchy, are due some fearless speech sooner or later. The flaw of unjust *parrhesia* is that of a broken clock being right

twice a day, yet still being broken. Just because the unjust *parrhesiast* may be correct that factually some people are engaging in oppression does not mean they are justified in ignoring, or being ignorant of, the power relations behind why those people are oppressing others. Nor are they justified in reducing them to either their act of oppression, their place in a broader system of oppression, and/or whatever benefits they may draw from their actions or status.

Relatedly, because truth can be painful, the listener's discomfort does not determine whether parrhesia is just. What does is the *parrhesiast's* mindset—i.e., their philosophical framework, the power dynamics shaping the exchange, and their intention. Is their logic a rigid oppressor/oppressed binary? Are they attentive to how they came to occupy the role of *parrhesiast* and the other the role of recipient? Are they seeking to uplift both speaker and listener, or to put the latter down?

Intention, too, is subtle, for whether the *parrhesiast* feels powerful as a consequence of their fearless speaking is not in-itself a determining factor of whether they are speaking justly. In some cases, a speaker may feel empowered by speaking truth to the powerful, and this feeling of empowerment can be a positive force for change, within themselves and, ultimately, the collective. However, when the desire for power becomes the *primary* motivation behind their speaking, overshadowing any commitment to truth and justice, then their speaking is moving in the direction of injustice. This is particularly problematic when the *parrhesiast* is not actually challenging power structures, but rather reinforcing them by targeting those with less power. In such cases, their desire for power, coupled with a lack of reflection on the real power dynamics at play, results in unjust *parrhesia*, for they are speaking more to gain personal gratification than engage in genuine critique.

In today's discursive battlefield, if Carlson is any measure and duplicitous *parrhesia* can be said to be a tendency of the contemporary Right, unjust *parrhesia* would be a tendency of the contemporary Left. It is easy to see why that would be the case, as after all the Left is characterised by a keen focus on social justice.

Consequently, it will be from the Left that I will seek a case study of a rhetorical practice in which we can often hear unjust *parrhesia*: privilege checking.

The concept of “privilege” is supposed to connote any systemic, non-systemic and even purely context-specific unfair advantages that have been afforded to a demographic group primarily on the basis of them being that demographic.²⁹ Take for example something as seemingly innocuous as extroversion, a personality trait. An extrovert will likely have an unfair advantage over an introvert in a setting that has been structured to prioritise extroversion and also lacks any correctives for introversion. What is key here is the relative nature of the extrovert’s privilege, for when they are removed from that setting, their unfair advantage may dissipate.

Privilege checking is a practice typically undertaken by Left-wing social justice activists to flag behaviors which they consider to have been undertaken due to a lack of sensitivity to relevant power imbalances. It is usually performed by one person literally telling another person to “check” their privilege, but it can be less direct and explicit. Note that it is also supposed to be a practice people do to *themselves*, so that they foster the appropriate sensitivity and avoid, as much as is possible, reinforcing power imbalances.

However, it is easy for the would-be privilege-checker to slip from flagging a *behavior* as privileged to a *person* as privileged. Indeed, privilege checking has come under criticism in recent years from across the ideological spectrum, but especially from the Right, in part for precisely this.³⁰ To be absolutely clear about my own personal stance, I believe privilege checking, when authentic and properly done, has its rightful place. My argument here is that when privilege checking, as a form of *parrhesia*, slides into a wholesale criticism of a person’s very being, thereby it becomes unjust.

Apropos the Cynics, I will briefly share two personal anecdotes of when I think privilege checking was enacted in an unjust manner. The first anecdote concerns “Griffin,” a journalist colleague who encountered injustice in their career but

seemingly refused to recognise it for what it was because of their own racial identity. The second anecdote concerns “Salih,” a non-journalist colleague who nearly committed injustice against my own person. In both anecdotes, my colleagues seemed either hesitant (Griffin) or unaware (Salih) of the injustice actually happening because they perceived privilege, and by extension power, as an essential feature of a group, namely, men of partial or full European-descent and either Christian belief or heritage. Griffin, like me, was themselves a member of that demographic; Salih was an immigrant from a non-European and non-Christian country.

Before proceeding, a few important ethical notes are required. To begin with, I have not requested permission from either of Griffin or Salih to share these anecdotes, and I want to be very clear in advance that my purpose here is not to portray the one as a victim and the other as a villain. We must also be mindful that because these are anecdotes, what I am really recounting here are snippets of my colleagues, very specific moments in their lives and my interactions with them that do not in any way necessarily represent the sum total of their viewpoints.

Now, the specifics of the injustice encountered by Griffin do not matter; they boiled down to someone attempting to block their much deserved promotion for reasons, as I understand it, purely of personal enmity. This came up in the context of a conversation between Griffin and I about privilege. My colleague had courageously dedicated not only their entire career to social justice, but also their private life, having made conscious choices about the constitution of their family that they felt served the greater good. I asked Griffin whether they themselves had ever experienced injustice, and they were confused by my question. When I used their promotion situation as an example, they downplayed it. They recognised the unfairness of the situation, but there was something disembodied in how they did, as though the unfairness was not really being done to them, but to someone else who happened to be them. I was struck by the sad irony: despite being a fearless speaker for the rights of others, they were seemingly mute about their own rights.

The specifics of the situation with Salih also do not matter; we were having a legitimate dispute about finances when they suddenly advanced the claim that I owed them money because I was privileged and they were unprivileged. What is important to stress here is that they were not being disingenuous and manipulative; no, they genuinely believed that they had a right to my money because of their immigrant status in the United States. I confronted them with my own impression that they were making this claim out of their own sense of entitlement. They retorted that I had “a way with words,” insinuating that I was being deceitful.

The incident with Salih revealed two things. First and importantly was the depth of their frustration as an immigrant in the United States – that should not be denied or diminished, as their emotional state does provide important context. However, second and pertinent to my purposes in this paper was their conception of privilege as something that I *inherently* possessed, and that they *inherently* did not and could not possess. In their mind, we existed in two fundamentally different ontological classes, meaning that privilege-checking was something that they were right to do to me, but not something I was right to do to them (although in fairness, I was wrong to attribute the motive of their claim specifically to entitlement rather than an unjust sense of privilege). Indeed, when it became clear I was not going to give them my money, they bitterly remarked, “I guess I’ll always be just an immigrant.”

What these anecdotes are meant to illustrate is that there is privilege checking as a sincere effort to make society more just, and there is privilege checking as an *ad hominem* rhetorical fallacy used against those perceived to be privileged. In simpler terms, there is privilege checking as good *parrhesia* and there is privilege checking as bad *parrhesia*. When the privilege checking is just, the provocation, even if done in-artfully, is intended by the *parrhesiast* to jolt the recipient into being more conscious of power relations in society, but when it is unjust, the provocation is intended to hurt the recipient and make the *parrhesiast* feel powerful. Perversely, unjust privilege checking even establishes a new kind of privilege, if of a purely

rhetorical nature. This rhetorical privilege grants an unfair advantage to those without, so to speak, real privilege: privilege not in a substantive societal sense, but in a discursive sense, in the here-and-now of a concrete dispute between concrete parties.

In both good and bad privilege-checking, there is fearless speaking of what is perceived to be a hard truth concerning the interlocutor. However, in the one, the act of privilege checking is indeed only that, a check; in the other, it is an accusation. Put metaphysically, in good privilege checking (just *parrhesia*), the act of checking is intended to include the checked in the kosmopolis; in bad privilege checking (unjust *parrhesia*), it is intended to foreclose the possibility of the checked from participating in genuine discourse with the checker, thereby excluding them from the kosmopolis.

3. FEARLESSNESS

The unfortunate reality is that the United States' media and political system has immense algorithmic incentives to actively promote bad *parrhesia*. After all, adversarialness rivets attention to itself, and this can be both very financially profitable and very conducive to engineering electoral outcomes.³¹ So, given that the system thrives on all this fearful screaming, what can be done?

I propose that it falls to the public and journalists – both of whom, to be sure, have also been contributing to the crisis, each in their own way – to act truly fearlessly. The good news is that this does not require us to engage in yet more agonism. Agonism is only one form of fearlessness. There are other forms. I propose the following four, although doubtlessly this list can be expanded: fearless silence, fearless listening, fearless curiosity, and irenic fearless speaking.

Our ancestors and our ancestors' ancestors knew these other kinds of fearlessness quite well, we have just forgotten them. It must also be said that implementing these four is not always straightforward, and they can also become misused and corrupted; I will attempt to outline some of the complexities here. And also note

that none of these kinds of fearlessness are mutually exclusive; in fact, they can interact and reinforce each other.

3.1. FEARLESS SILENCE

In a situation in which we are all demanded to speak fearlessly for or against a side, the choice not to speak at all can be courageous. The fearlessly silent generally make one of two decisions: to take a side but not share it, so as not to become deaf to others; or to abstain from the debate, either because the parties are too garrulous and contentious to be listened to, and/or because the debate itself strikes them as deeply suspect. The fearlessly silent could also be understood as actualising Foucauldian “self-care,” turning inward toward themselves, their intimates, and their hobbies. They may even take the self-care to the point of a sort of asceticism.

Of course, events that are loud enough will reach even the most secluded hermit. Contemporary Luddites who renounce all digital connection still cannot escape the tumult, for it will pursue them through their intimates, strangers, or even just the errant broadcast or newspaper headline. Nevertheless, my impression is that fearless silence has already long been undertaken by many everyday Americans. One potential manifestation of it, or a phenomenon analogous to it, has been the movement to abstain from voting in presidential elections.³²

That said, I should also note that fearless silence has a potential downside: what if withdrawing is what the bastards want? Indeed, in a democratic context, if fearless silence results in either an uninformed vote or no vote at all, it may have been inadvertently damaging to both the silent and society. There is also the bedeviling question of whether and when fearless silence is not truly fearless at all, but fearful.

Beyond considerations of courage, there is also a moral dilemma to consider. Specifically, it is a dilemma that arises when we take seriously Niemöller’s call to speak fearlessly: when the stakes become so severe such that to care for yourself

is to forsake society, yet to care for society is to forsake yourself, which must you choose?

3.2. FEARLESS LISTENING

Listening fearlessly also entails a conscious decision to withdraw from the debate, but it is characterised by the additional conscious decision to stand within ambiguity and to hear what is being said, not only by all of the debaters, but also by those who may either not be participating or have been prevented from doing so. What makes this choice especially challenging is that the would-be fearless listener may be coming from one of the participating sides, or be very inclined to them.³³

Fearless listening does not necessarily require fearless curiosity, though they often occur in parallel. In some circumstances, it may be sufficient to simply observe and be studiously, if courageously, silent. Nevertheless, there are other circumstances in which being fearlessly curious in combination with listening fearlessly can be transformative. As with everything related to *parrhesia*, it requires discernment to know which kind of circumstance one is in.

And like fearless silence, “too much” fearless listening may be possible. This happens by giving ear to the undeserving, or giving ear to the deserving but for too long. Still, it is difficult to say precisely where the line is.

3.3. FEARLESS CURIOSITY

It might help to think of these four other kinds of fearlessness as concentric circles. At the center is the maelstrom of contentiousness, fueled by all manner of bad *parrhesia*. This maelstrom drives the need to choose or prioritise between the other forms of fearlessness. The four kinds here thus represent, in part, different levels of exposure to the swirling maw of fearful screaming. Fearless silence is the furthest away, and thus offers the most safety, while fearless speaking is the closest, and thus offers the most vulnerability. Fearless listening is also in the

outer orbit, but not as far out as fearless silence. Similarly, fearless curiosity is in the inner orbit, but not as near as fearless speaking.

Fearless curiosity is the conscious choice to ask sincere, tough, even potentially embarrassing questions – tough and potentially embarrassing questions not only for those queried, but also for the inquirer, hence the increased vulnerability. Because the inquirer is seeking the truth, fearless curiosity requires the moral preparedness not only to be wrong, but to be derided and portrayed as a potential conspirator against the “obviously” and “self-evidently” true. It is, e.g., the willingness to be denounced as a puppet of the patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, and the like, for asking whether and how it could be possible for a biological man to be gendered as a woman, or to be ridiculed as a beta male, feminazi, East coast elite or some such for asking whether and how the Bible genuinely supports the traditional American heteronormative family.

Once again, it is possible for fearless curiosity to be misplaced, faulty, fearful. As an example, consider the difference between a conspiracy theorist and a conspiracist, the former dedicated to a specific framework or expression of paranoia, the other dedicated to paranoia itself. The nascent but sincere conspiracy theorist, thrust by discursive trauma into the illusory vortex of QAnon, could be described as fearlessly curious, insofar that the questions they ask are courageous, if ill-informed and dragging them further away from truth. However, as with hate speech, it is possible to be fearless in act but not in substance. Consider the conspiracist Alex Jones, whose questions are leading, transgressive, instigative. He knows what he is doing, yet he defends himself as “just asking questions,” – even when, as in the case of his slanderous attacks on the survivors of the Sandy Hook massacre, he has caused very real injury.

3.4. IRENIC FEARLESS SPEECH

One way to articulate the difference between Cynical and Foucauldian *parrhesia* is that the former is *necessarily* agonistic while the latter *can be otherwise*. The

Foucauldian *parrhesiat* could very well need to engage in agonism, but it is not their default stance; they are open to other possibilities, including seeking consensus and harmony. This is what I call irenic *parrhesia*, and probably the greatest challenge to imagining it is precisely the legacy of Cynical *parrhesia*.

To be absolutely clear, there is a place for agonistic *parrhesia*, and irenic *parrhesia* does not mean compromising on truth for the sake of consensus. The irenic *parrhesiast* must be prepared to speak truth, even if it challenges the status quo or provokes discomfort. However, the manner in which truth is spoken does matter. Rather than seeking to cajole and antagonise, the irenic *parrhesiast* aims to create a space for genuine dialogue and understanding.

This leads me to another point: within the Right and the Left, there is likely to be great reluctance to abandon agonism due to fear of a shallow centrism that creates false equivalencies and waters down positions that ought not be watered down. This fear is not at all unfounded. There certainly are bad forms of irenism, notably journalistic “both-sidism.”³⁴ Over the decades, both-sidism has actually facilitated disinformation on a host of issues, ranging from whether smoking causes cancer to whether global warming is a real phenomenon driven by human action.

Simply put, consensus and harmony are not always possible or desirable. In some cases, fundamental disagreements cannot be overcome, and the *parrhesiast* must be willing to stand their ground. However, even in these situations, the irenic approach to *parrhesia* seeks to maintain a spirit of good faith and respect for the humanity of the interlocutor. The goal is not to paper over differences, but to create the conditions for a more productive and empathetic exchange.

In the context of democracy, irenic *parrhesia* can play a vital role in countering the polarisation and tribalism that impede constructive public discourse. By deploying a mode of truth-telling that is firm in its convictions yet open to the perspectives of others, the irenic *parrhesiast* can help to foster a culture of critical reflection

and mutual understanding. This does not guarantee consensus and harmony, but it can help to create a shared basis for grappling with difficult issues.

Additionally, because speaking fearlessly but irenically is still speaking fearlessly, it is just as much at the threshold of today's maelstrom as agonistic *parrhesia*, meaning the irenic *parrhesiast* will still be whipped and lashed by the terrible winds of fearful screaming. To illustrate, here is a final personal anecdote.

Throughout the Israeli invasion of Gaza, I have chosen to be fearlessly silent, my sense of the situation being that those fearfully screaming right now – on both sides of the conflict – are screaming so very loudly that no one else can be heard. To be sure, there are very real moral stakes in this conflict; the fearful screaming is not without emotional merit. Yet, the screaming drowned out any space to discuss the crisis irenically. I experienced this the sole time I did attempt to speak via my Instagram account.

For context, my Instagram account is restricted, meaning that when I made my sole post about the conflict, mostly friends, *actual* friends, could see it. My tone was approachable, not accusatory and self-righteous, but I did make my point firmly: it was the responsibility of we the global public, not only governments but everyday people, to refrain from promulgating essentialising narratives about both the Palestinians and Israelis, such as the claim that Palestinian culture is fundamentally concerned with exterminating Jews, or the claim that Israeli culture is fundamentally concerned with stealing Arab land. I also argued that whatever sympathies and grievances we as individuals may have toward one or the other side, it is our responsibility to help them both achieve peace with each other.

Some in my Instagram audience viscerally rejected my statement. Muslim and Jewish friends accused me of both-sidism and being too “afraid” to speak the “truth” of the “evil nature” of the other side. I tried to point out them that it is possible for multiple truths to equally co-exist, e.g., that it is true the Hamas

attack on October 7, 2023, was genocidal, but so, too, has been the Israeli military response; that it is true those with an extremist temperament will always seek out a rationalisation for their extremist violence, and so in an important sense these actions cannot be justified by pointing to history, but it is also true that extremism does have an historical context composed of actions and reactions; and so on. They also rejected these ideas. For them, there was only one “hard truth,” and it was a horrifying one: the monstrosity of the enemy and the cowardice of the world.

This was disheartening, for sure. Yet, my attempt to be an irenic *parrhesiast* also aroused support, albeit privately through direct messages – from the silent, both fearless and fearful. In fact, my post aroused far more support than rejection. There were those who heard me, including Muslims and Jews. Some agreed with my stance, some did not, but they all appreciated the attempt to talk about the tragic situation in a manner that struck them as striving to be fearless *and* fair.

4. CONCLUSION

When the first three of these four other forms of fearlessness are combined, the result can be a transformed individual. When combined with the fourth form, though, the result can be a transformed collective. This is where distinguishing which of these four is appropriate for the everyday citizen and which is appropriate for the journalist is of paramount importance.

For example, whatever the ethical quandaries the choice to be fearlessly silent may pose, I insist it is a worthy one, but only for the everyday citizen; it is simply not a valid choice available to the journalist, who has a crucial role to play in resolving our crisis of bad *parrhesia*, precisely because it is their task in society is to be fearless speakers. Yes, they must be tactical about when and how they speak, but they must speak. At the same time, as *parrhesiasts*, they must have that Foucauldian sensitivity to discern what the present historical moment is actually calling for: is it more agonism, or irenism? I believe that a truly fearless assessment

will show that it is now time for irenism.

This is not to suggest that American journalism must absolutely avoid agonism, much less engage in facile both-sidism. Again, the truth must be spoken, and sometimes a side in a debate is prejudiced, unmoored from facts and evidence, fallacious, deceitful, misinformed or disinformed, and if so, they need to be shown as such. Not only this, but sometimes the claim that there is a debate is itself a manipulation tactic by those who know they are in the wrong.

Nor am I suggesting that American journalism must enforce an artificial conformity, tranquility or camaraderie onto the audience. That would be untruthful, if not authoritarian. People feel what they feel; it is the journalist's job to help them determine for themselves whether their feelings are founded, not to shame or censor them into feeling differently. The journalist, not unlike a shaman confronting evil spirits, must wrestle with their audience's biases. And, again not unlike a shaman, this means that the journalist must also constantly struggle within themselves between two desires: their fearful desire for something to *be* true, versus their fearless desire to know, and give voice to, what *is* true.

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political parrhesia and the state's rhetoric in iran

majid heidari

INTRODUCTION

Parrhesia is often explored within the framework of democracy, with the idea that they are closely intertwined, as emphasized by Dyrberg¹ when citing Foucault, who argued that “there must be *parrhesia*; for there to be *parrhesia* there must be democracy. There is a fundamental circularity.” This underscores the interdependency between *parrhesia* and democracy, indicating a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two.

However, this self-reinforcing dynamic can potentially be disrupted when

examining instances of *parrhesia* in non-democratic societies, where freedom of expression is rare. Nevertheless, as noted by Goodnight,² the analysis of cases of *parrhesia* offers valuable insights into the ever-evolving complexities of critical discourse – a process aimed at reconciling belief, obligation, opposition, and communication. In this context, discourses of *parrhesia* serve as enduring platforms for understanding the inherent challenges of expressing dissent.

Applying a similar line of reasoning, an examination of instances of *parrhesia* in the recent history of Iran would enrich our comprehension of this concept. Furthermore, it would illuminate a facet of the discourse that has received limited attention: how autocratic states respond to acts of *parrhesia*?

In Foucault's perspective,³ political *parrhesia* can be defined as a scenario in which a citizen openly and honestly addresses their superior or ruler to criticise government policies. In essence, it involves a politically engaged individual who speaks with sincerity. Such an individual prioritises the issue at hand and is willing to confront challenges or imminent dangers directly, setting aside irrelevant particularistic considerations. This notion of *parrhesia* is viewed as a modern concept.

However, it's noteworthy that Laurent Pernot, as reported by Townsend,⁴ argued that political *parrhesia*, much like rhetoric, serves as the foundational form of ethical *parrhesia*, which was the primary focus of Foucault's exploration and revolves around candid truth-telling in a dialectical format. According to Pernot's perspective, rhetoric can be traced back to its origins as the foundational form of political discourse, harking back to the days when Athenian citizens delivered speeches in the senate. Pernot suggests that ethical *parrhesia* represents a more recent evolution within the realm of political *parrhesia*. In ethical *parrhesia*, a citizen boldly confronts their superior or ruler to critique government policies. Unlike addressing a general audience, ethical *parrhesia* specifically targets the ruler in question. Pernot argues that even though political speakers may not directly criticise the ruler, they still face certain risks. Their reputation could be

tarnished, they might be susceptible to exile on charges of corruption, or they could lose their speaking privileges. In this context, the speaker does not directly challenge the ruler but instead takes on the “ruling majority.”⁵

In the examples presented in this paper, we can discern the presence of *parrhesia* in both of its dimensions. Firstly, there is what Pernot terms political *parrhesia*, which pertains to politicians critiquing the ruling majority. Secondly, there is Foucault’s political *parrhesia* and involves citizens openly critiquing those in positions of power.

Furthermore, I would like to introduce another facet of *parrhesia* that has arisen within the context of autocracy in Iran. Here, the state’s discourse justifies its decisions and wrongdoings by emphasising the notion of resistance against enemies and crafting a narrative of victimhood. This narrative serves to redefine *parrhesia* as bold criticism of Western countries while absolving high officials of any blame for the hardships faced by the nation. This demonstrates how the concept of *parrhesia* can be co-opted and manipulated within the specific political and ideological framework of an autocratic regime.

In the following, we can categorise cases one and two, which occurred in the first two decades after the revolution, as examples of what Pernot refers to as political *parrhesia*. Conversely, case three, which transpired before the 1979 revolution, and case four, which occurred four decades later, are instances of *parrhesia* in line with Foucault’s understanding, as demonstrated by certain writers and social activists.

Finally, this paper includes an interview in which two distinct interpretations of *parrhesia* become evident. While one person embodies genuine *parrhesia*, the other side represents the government’s discourse, characterised by themes of resistance, victimhood, and bold criticism of Western countries to explain the nation’s hardships. This discourse often exonerates high officials from any responsibility for mistakes or wrongdoing.

CASE ONE: LETTER OF THE NINETY

Following the 1979 revolution in Iran, various political groups and officials conveyed their concerns to the Iranian leadership through letters, advocating for political reforms. Of particular significance are two notable letters written at different junctures: one by prominent political activists in 1990, twelve years after the revolution; another by reformist Parliament Members in 2003.

The initial letter, bearing the ominous declaration “the nation and the country have reached the edge of the abyss!”, was part of a significant document known as the “Letter of the Ninety.” This letter, composed in 1990, was signed by a group of activists from the Freedom Movement and opposition figures operating under the banner of “The Society for the Defense of Freedom and National Sovereignty of Iran.” The letter was published in four distinct sections, each addressing critical aspects of Iranian society and governance. These sections were titled “Economic, Social, and Living Conditions,” “Freedom, Security, and Moral and Administrative Aspects,” “Independence, Survival, and Reassessment of the Country,” and “International Relations and Foreign Policy.” The primary objective of this letter was to issue a comprehensive critique of the country’s prevailing circumstances and to challenge the status quo.⁶

The individuals who authored and signed this letter were prominent figures within the 1979 revolution, with some holding official positions at the time. The letter primarily served as a compilation of suggestions aimed at improving conditions and safeguarding against the emergence of dictatorship. Considering the revolutionary climate and the potential risks involved, it can be viewed as a remarkable exemplification of *parrhesia*. The act of expressing their candid opinions and confronting the prevailing power structures carried significant personal risks for these activists. In the aftermath, many of the signatories encountered difficulties and faced consequences that resulted in the loss of their political statuses or positions.

CASE TWO: THE CUP OF POISON

The second letter was written by members of Parliament. They wrote a letter to emphasise the need for reconciliation with the people in the face of challenges and whispers of using referendums as a means to change the system. It rejects the idea of creating a monolithic society and resorting to authoritarian methods. Instead, it advocates for embracing true democracy, establishing a practical model that upholds freedom and dignity, and empowering the people. The letter acknowledges the legitimacy of decisions based on national will and the votes of the people, but highlights the importance of engaging with the public, addressing their concerns, and providing a democratic framework that aligns with their aspirations. Furthermore, the letter calls for a sincere and transparent approach from the government, focusing on the eradication of poverty, ensuring the well-being of the people, and strengthening the economic foundations of the country. It recognises the need for political and economic stability, achieved through a government derived from the people, and emphasises the importance of following the path of truth.⁷

The “Cup of Poison” letter, as it came to be known, serves as a powerful embodiment of *parrhesia*. Despite being aware that signing the letter could lead to their disqualification from participating in the upcoming election by the Guardian Council, many of the signatories, who were members of parliament, decided to put their names on it. It is worth noting that some of the notable signatories, including Fatemeh Haqiqatju, Ali Akbar Musavi Khoeni, Rajabali Mazrooei, Jamileh Kadivar, and Nouraldin Pirmoazen, have since left Iran. Nonetheless, this letter stands as a remarkable testament to *parrhesia*, showcasing an unwavering dedication to speaking truthfully and openly, even in the face of adversity. Despite the personal risks involved, these individuals exhibited courage in expressing their convictions and shedding light on critical issues within the socio-political landscape of contemporary Iran.

ANALYSIS

A more appropriate approach for understanding the mentioned instances of *parrhesia*, namely the “Letter of the Ninety” and the enigmatic “Cup of Poison,” is to apply Pernot’s concept of *parrhesia*. Pernot⁸ posits that political *parrhesia* encompasses individuals, including officials, who fearlessly speak the truth from within the system, even when faced with potential consequences like tarnishing their reputation, the threat of exile due to corruption charges, or the loss of their right to express themselves. In this context, the speaker is not directly challenging the ruler but rather daring to confront the prevailing “ruling majority” with their candid expressions of dissent.

As observed, the authors of these letters were individuals actively involved during the revolutionary period and also held positions within the parliament. Their correspondence predominantly took the form of cautionary messages, wherein they openly critiqued the policies of the Islamic Republic. It’s important to note that their criticism was directed at the policies themselves and not at the Supreme Leader personally. This aligns perfectly with Pernot’s concept of political *parrhesia*, wherein politicians courageously confront the governing majority while being fully cognizant of the potential repercussions.

In 2023, the Supreme Leader made reference to these letters and characterised them as unfair. He also framed his own response to these letters as an act of “resistance.” He stated:

Following the passing of Imam Khomeini in 1989, a declaration was issued. This declaration involved some intellectuals, including prominent figures within the system, who had previously worked within the regime and asserted that the system was on the brink of collapse. When did this occur? In 1989. Also, in 2003, a group of parliamentarians penned a letter to me. It was an undeniably unfair letter, extremely unjust. They made certain assertions and posed questions that they themselves should have answered, considering their control over the parliament and government. They were the ones obligated to provide the answers. They posed questions to me. The essence of that letter implied that we

should surrender, or else our efforts would come to an end. It was in 2003. We did not surrender; we stood steadfast, and with the grace of God, we will continue to stand firm.

In this statement, the Supreme Leader portrays these letters as unjust and critical of the regime's leadership. He asserts that their intent was to pressure the leadership to yield, but the leadership chose to resist and remain resolute in his course. This framing underscores the idea of "resistance" and portrays the government's response as a form of resilience in the face of criticism, aligning with the government's narrative of confronting challenges from Western countries.

Indeed, in these cases, the concept of "resistance" served as the response of the Supreme Leader to calls for democratic changes. This resistance was a prevailing narrative in the first two decades following the 1979 revolution and was prominently featured in national television and state propaganda. Over time, this narrative evolved and culminated in the notion of the "Axis of Resistance."⁹

The "Axis of Resistance" refers to an anti-Western, anti-Israeli, and anti-Saudi political and informal military alliance. This alliance encompasses Iran, various militant groups in Palestine, the Syrian Government, and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah. It represents a coordinated effort against what these parties perceive as external threats and influences, particularly from Western countries, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. This concept highlights the continuation of the discourse of resistance in Iran's foreign policy and regional relations.

CASE THREE: TEN NIGHTS OF GOETHE

In October 1977 (about a year before the Revolution), the Writers Association of Iran, in collaboration with the Goethe Institute, organized a 10-night program called "Ten Nights of Goethe," which was unprecedented in Iranian contemporary history. During these ten nights, fourteen writers and forty-three poets, including some who were banned from writing and whose works were prohibited from being published, gathered among thousands of cultural enthusiasts who sat in the rain.

They insisted on the elimination of censorship and the recognition of the right to freedom of expression in Iran. Furthermore, this was the first movement and announcement of the revival of the Writers' Association of Iran after its closure in 1970, which indicated that in a time when the Pahlavi government sought to demonstrate the existence of political openness in Iran to the world, there was also agitation and unrest within society and beneath the surface of the city. One year later, those agitations, of course, took on a revolutionary character.¹⁰

The most prominent writers and poets of that era gathered and spoke for thousands of people about freedom of speech. On the first night, a statement was read by the secretariat of the Writers' Association, stating that the most important demand of the association was "freedom of thought and expression," followed by "preserving the financial rights of writers." According to the writers, the statement declared that

... everyone is free to express and interpret what they think or create in the form of poetry and literature, publish it, and present it to others. And if, in the exercise of this freedom, harm is done to someone or the entire society, then after proving the occurrence of harm, it should be judged according to legal standards.

Therefore, the association considered "pre-publication censorship" as a practice contrary to the principle of freedom and contrary to the constitution. For this reason, while opposing book and press censorship, they demanded the abolition of censorship and the dissolution of the relevant institutions and organizations, as they regarded it as the "sole condition for nurturing talents and elevating the level of culture in Iran." They believed that Iranian society was a mature, independent society with the right to choose its own "intellectual nourishment."¹¹

During the event, all the courageous speakers advocated for freedom of thought and expression, each expressing their demands to lift censorship in various ways; great example of the practice of *parrhesia*. However, what happened to these individuals years after the 1979 Revolution, which had the slogans of independence

and freedom? Now that four decades have passed since the 1979 Revolution, it is essential to investigate the lives of these individuals. I have discovered that among the 13 most prominent organisers and speakers, almost all of them either left Iran or faced worse conditions regarding freedom of expression after the revolution.

Shams Al-e Ahmad, Simin Daneshvar (brother and wife of Jala-e Al Ahmad, favourite thinker of the Revolution) and Hoshang Golshiri stayed in Iran despite the widespread censorship. But Rahmatollah Moghaddam Maraghe'I, Bahram Beyzai,¹² Golam-Hossein Saedi,¹³ Baqer Momeni,¹⁴ Kazem Islamiye,¹⁵ Dariush Ashoori,¹⁶ Ismail Khoei,¹⁷ Baqer Parham,¹⁸ and Mahmoud Beh-Azin¹⁹ left Iran – and Mostafa Rahimi²⁰ who stayed was imprisoned and suspiciously died.

Many other individuals who were members of the Writers Association suffered a similar fate. Unfortunately, the situation of the Iranian Writers Association today, 46 years after the Nights of Goethe's Poetry, has not seen any improvement. It can be claimed that the censorship and pressure on writers have worsened. For example, two prominent writers were victims of serial murders, later revealed to be carried out by security institutions, and so were in truth assassinated (Mohammad Mokhtari and Jaafar Pouyandeh). Commemorating the anniversary of the renowned poet Ahmad Shamlou has always been accompanied by difficulties. And according to the American PEN Center, Iran has the second largest prison for writers and the largest prison for female writers in the world. In one of the most significant recent incidents, Baktash Abtin, an Iranian poet who was detained during the 18th anniversary ceremony of Mohammad Mokhtari and Jaafar Pouyandeh, lost his life in detention under tragic and symbolic circumstances.²¹

"Ten Nights of Goethe" stands out as a significant occurrence within the chronicles of modern-day Iran, wherein numerous instances of *parrhesia* can be discerned. However, regrettably, subsequent to the revolution, these aspirations and concepts gradually waned, giving rise to a new interpretation of *parrhesia*. A

perceptive speaker had already alluded to this altered connotation of *parrhesia*. Golam-Hossein Saedi, who was the speaker on the fourth night, mentions the “pseudo-artists” in his remarks. Sa’adi considers these artists as opportunists who constantly appear in the media and festivals. He describes them as sycophantic, obsequious, servile, and submissive to the powerful, while being oppressive, tyrannical, self-satisfied, and arrogant towards the people. He believes that pseudo-artists are the product of hypocrisy and a consequence of falseness. They undermine true artists and spread the seeds of false art everywhere. “When there is censorship and falsification, why shouldn’t there be pseudo-artists?”²²

Following the revolution, this warning materialised, and artists were classified into distinct categories, namely Committed and Revolutionary Artists, as well as Non-committed, Non-revolutionary Artists. In Iran, the anniversary of the death of Morteza Avini (a documentary filmmaker and journalist, particularly known for his coverage of the Iran-Iraq war) has been officially designated as “Committed and Revolutionary Art Day” on the national calendar. An official has stated that committed art is characterised by its alignment with national and religious beliefs, a concept that emerged in Iran following the Islamic Revolution. Committed and Revolutionary artists receive support from the government and claim to boldly criticise the capitalism and Iran’s main enemy, namely the United States, while speaking the truth. “Islamic Revolutionary art is committed to truth and anti-capitalism, and martyr Avini was an exemplary figure of this revolutionary art.”²³

CASE FOUR: THE 14TH STATEMENT

Finally, the last letter I would like to mention is called the 14th Statement, also known as the Declaration 14, that is a statement released by 14 social activists in 2019 which coincided with the anniversary of the 2009 presidential elections in Iran. The statement was issued by a group of civil activists and political campaigners inside and outside Iran, with the aim of presenting a series of political and civil demands. The signatories of this statement criticized the

situation in political, social, and economic aspects, addressing the economic, civil, and political problems in the country. They called for constitutional reforms, the departure from power of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, and a transition to a republican system. The signatories cited reasons for their demands, including “widespread violation of civil rights, especially women’s rights,” “incompetence in leadership and proper governance of the country,” and “authoritarianism of the ruling system, lack of separation of powers, and the impossibility of holding free elections.” The mentioned statement addresses the “people of Iran” as its audience and concludes with a call for the people to rise up.²⁴

Following the release of the statement, 14 Iranian women activists who were living abroad expressed their solidarity with the 14 individuals by signing a supportive statement. At the same time, 14 female activists within Iran published a letter outlining their civil and political demands and showing support for the 14 individuals. This letter received a warm reception from the public, artists, writers, prominent social and political activists, and even sparked a campaign called “I am the 15th person,” which aimed to further raise awareness and support. However, a number of signatories of the statement and their supporters were collectively sentenced to a total of 72 years in prison, 6 years of exile, and a 6-year ban on any form of activity. And the state called their action a “conspiracy and collusion to act against national security,” “propaganda against the system,” and “disturbing public order.”

THE ANALYSIS

These two incidents match the modern definition by Foucault of *parrhesia*, as a situation in which a citizen openly and candidly communicates with their superior or ruler to criticise government policies.

Additionally, the state’s response to these letters follows a recurring pattern observed in its reactions to most criticisms of government officials. The state

frequently dismisses these letters as Western propaganda, aiming to quell the people's optimism. *Parrhesiasts* are often accused of forsaking the ideals and values of the revolution and lacking the "insight" possessed by the Supreme Leader. The state's narrative attributes the nation's hardships to Western conspiracies, portraying the Iranian populace as victims of these schemes, with a particular emphasis on the notion of a "cultural attack." By employing these discourses, the state consistently evades giving direct responses, as illustrated in the subsequent example. The summary of the state's response can be discerned in the following instance.

During a gathering attended by a select group of filmmakers and writers, a courageous artist confronted the Supreme Leader, expressing concerns about perceived discrimination and noting a lack of responsiveness to official scandals.²⁵

In response, the leader's statement framed the situation within a broader context, emphasising his affection for all individuals and including them in his prayers. He acknowledged the presence of injustice and discrimination in the world, attributing them to the influence of capitalism. He then positioned the Islamic Republic as a beacon of resistance against capitalism, highlighting the challenges faced but maintaining that these challenges did not undermine the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic.

These responses by the state to acts of *parrhesia* have given rise to two distinct factions within the artistic and literary community. One faction comprises artists and writers who occupy a relatively disadvantaged position in the power structure and reject the narratives of resistance and victimhood. They assert that the nation's hardships are a direct consequence of the actions of high-ranking officials in power. The other faction has internalised the state's narratives.

Both groups enjoy the freedom to engage in outspoken criticism of various aspects of Western countries and culture, as this is actively encouraged by the state as a form of *parrhesia*. However, individuals who dare to critique high-

ranking officials in Iran often face accusations of lacking insight, abandoning the values of the revolution, or aligning themselves with the enemy. This illustrates how *parrhesia*, when employed by the state, provides a platform for bold criticism of the West while discouraging criticism of domestic leadership.

CASE FIVE: TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF PARRHESIA

The last illustration of *parrhesia* examined in this paper is an enlightening interview featuring representatives from both interpretations of *parrhesia* previously discussed in the Iranian context. This interview²⁶ serves as a forum for individuals who critique the state while occupying a subordinate position, as well as those who primarily focus their criticisms on the West and mid-level officials. Through this interview, a diverse array of perspectives on *parrhesia* surfaces, providing valuable insights into various methods of expressing candid and critical viewpoints within the Iranian socio-political sphere.

One notable figure on one end of the spectrum is Mr. Nourizad, who has garnered recognition for his fearless criticism of the Iranian leader. He has become well-known for writing numerous critical letters, including the aforementioned “The 14th Statement.” Mr. Nourizad’s remarkable courage and audacity in openly expressing his critiques towards the leader and the underlying power dynamics are worthy of commendation. Interestingly, it is noteworthy that he was initially a fervent supporter of the leader during the revolution, adding an intriguing dimension to his story.

On the other side of the spectrum, the interviewer in this scenario exemplifies individuals who claim to practice *parrhesia* while still aligning themselves with the government. Although the interviewer’s background and reasoning suggest his affiliation with government supporters, subtle shifts can recently be observed in his stance. While he asserts his commitment to truthfulness and loyalty to the truth, it becomes evident that he avoids direct criticism towards the highest ranks in Iran, possibly due to his devotion to those in power, mainly the Supreme

Leader.

I will make an effort to report the key points presented by each speaker. In order to maintain impartiality, my focus will be on understanding their respective perspectives on truth and truth-telling, particularly in relation to power and power dynamics.

Mohammad Nourizad is an Iranian filmmaker, journalist, and political activist. He gained recognition for his critical views on the Iranian government and his involvement in various forms of artistic expression. Nourizad has written several letters to the Supreme Leader of Iran, expressing his opinions and concerns regarding the state of the country. Throughout his career, Nourizad has faced consequences for his outspokenness. In 2009, he was imprisoned for allegedly insulting the Supreme Leader and promoting propaganda against the regime. During his incarceration, he went on a hunger strike as a form of protest. Nourizad's activism and his willingness to openly criticise the government have made him a symbol of dissent in Iran. Despite previously supporting the revolution and the government, he later became disillusioned and voiced his discontent.²⁷

Hossein Dehbashi, the interviewer, has had a multifaceted career with significant involvement in governmental organizations and the media industry in Iran. His notable positions as a deputy in the Special Occasions TV Group, which serves as the national media authority and oversees other media outlets, demonstrate his expertise and influence in the media landscape. Additionally, his work as a writer and director in the Narration of Victory TV Group further highlights his contributions to the media industry. Dehbashi's affiliations with Imam Sadegh University, an institution focused on preparing individuals for governmental roles, signify his close ties to the government sector. This connection suggests his involvement in strategic communications and his understanding of the intricacies of government operations. Moreover, Dehbashi has made notable contributions to historical documentation through projects such as the Oral and Visual History Office of Contemporary Iran and the Oral History of the Leaders

of the Islamic Republic of Iran.²⁸

During the interview, Nourizad shares insights into the various stages of his life, which have shaped his perspective and led to significant transformations. He describes two distinct phases that have influenced his worldview. In the early stages, Nourizad was an ardent supporter of the leader and actively engaged in revolutionary activities. He deeply admired figures like Morteza Avini,²⁹ who played a pivotal role in promoting the ideals of the revolution and was a staunch supporter of its founder, Imam Khomeini. Inspired by these ideals, Nourizad participated actively in revolutionary endeavours, including contributing to infrastructure development in remote areas of Iran. He dedicated his talents to filmmaking and writing, using these mediums to propagate the virtues and principles of the revolution. However, a turning point occurred when Nourizad witnessed the government's repression of the 2009 protests. This experience profoundly impacted him and caused him to re-evaluate his beliefs. He began questioning the actions and policies of the government, including the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards. This critical self-reflection led him to recognize the unintended consequences of his earlier support and involvement, realising that his actions unwittingly contributed to the establishment of a religious dictatorship. Regrettably, Nourizad's vocal opposition to the regime came at a cost. He faced significant hardships, and his family also bore the repercussions of his dissent. Nonetheless, Nourizad's transformation and his courage to openly criticise the government and its repressive practices serve as a testament to his unwavering commitment to truth and justice.

In contrast to Nourizad's perspective, Dehbashi adopts a different approach in the interview. While giving Nourizad the opportunity to express himself, Dehbashi intermittently challenges his assertions and highlights what he perceives as errors or over-generalizations. Dehbashi openly expresses support for Hezbollah³⁰ and criticizes Nourizad for attributing all of Iran's challenges solely to the Revolutionary Guards,³¹ neglecting the role of other countries. Notably, Dehbashi consciously refrains from criticising the Supreme Leader

and the Revolutionary Guards, instead attributing a significant portion of Iran's issues to Western countries and former Iranian presidents. Dehbashi asserts that he presents specific facts and considers his perspective to be the truth, which diverges from Nourizad's viewpoint. He accuses Nourizad of adopting a radical approach and merely engaging in criticism, regardless of the group or individual targeted, suggesting that Nourizad's method remains consistent while the subjects of his criticism may change.

Indeed, Nourizad exemplifies *parrhesia* as he fearlessly criticises the central sources of power, fully aware of the risks and repercussions involved. On the other hand, Dehbashi represents a group of individuals who perceive themselves as victims of Western conspiracies. He presents himself as a bold critic of Western countries and certain factions within the country, notably excluding the leader and primary power holders, but rather targeting former presidents or lower-ranking officials.

Before proceeding to the next section of this essay, it's noteworthy to emphasise a significant point that surfaced during the conclusion of the interview. Dehbashi raises a pertinent question concerning the decline in Nourizad's influence on the public and the comparatively reduced responses to his speeches and actions, especially when compared to the past. Nourizad acknowledges the validity of this observation and attributes it to people's apprehension about associating themselves with him. This point will be revisited later in this paper.

PARRHESIA AND STATE'S RHETORIC

In this section, our objective is to initiate a dialogue between the state's responses and acts of *parrhesia*, taking inspiration from Goodnight's perspective. We regard *parrhesia* as a rhetorical instrument, allowing us to delve into the state's reactions to these acts. As a result, by using the examples of *parrhesia* mentioned earlier, we aim to investigate the state's narrative of resistance and victimhood, assess the element of *kairos*, and analyse the unique effects of *parrhesia* on the state's

stance.

Goodnight's analysis of *parrhesia* offers a valuable framework for understanding the state's responses to cases of *parrhesia*.³² Goodnight defines *parrhesia* as a "figure of thought associated with speaking truth to power." This concept encompasses the expression of bold and potentially risky statements, which can take two forms: (1) direct and impassioned declarations made spontaneously, and (2) statements that may be accompanied by qualifications or explanations, either spontaneously or as a habitual response to equivocation.

Goodnight underscores that *parrhesia* consistently denotes the act of expressing a communicative argument that questions entrenched beliefs held by the broader populace or those in positions of authority.³³ As a result, *parrhesia* emerges as the essential rhetorical tool of dissent. This viewpoint on *parrhesia* aids us in examining how those in authority react to truth and perceive *parrhesia* as a mode of argumentation.

According to Goodnight,³⁴ a *parrhesiastic* act is essentially a statement put forth in support of a particular truth, intended to provoke a response from others. This act of argumentation initiates an exchange or interaction within various contexts, such as dialogues, debates, dramas, or interrogations. The use of this rhetorical figure aims to alert participants to a discrepancy between what the speaker asserts as the truth and what is mistakenly accepted as truth by those who are uninformed, hold outdated views, or make misguided decisions, including those in power who may use deception to mislead the public.

In this context, Goodnight's analysis sheds light on how the state responds to cases of *parrhesia* by framing them as acts of dissent and dissenters as challenging established beliefs. The state's response may involve deflecting criticism, reinforcing its own narratives, or accusing dissenters of spreading misinformation. Goodnight's framework helps us understand the dynamics of power and argumentation in response to *parrhesia*.

The adoption of victimhood narratives by those in power in response to *parrhesiastic* acts has been a recurring strategy, observed in the Islamic Republic at different points in their histories.³⁵ By portraying themselves as victims, authorities often avoid directly addressing the substance of the criticism and instead employ a tactic of denial, effectively sidestepping the underlying issues. This pattern tends to emerge prominently when faced with criticism from notable figures. Consequently, one can deduce that an indicator of the effectiveness of *parrhesia* is when those in power instinctively deny the allegations and position themselves as victims. This defensive reaction serves as a clear signal that *parrhesia* has hit a nerve and presented a genuine challenge to the prevailing authority.

Also, the victim narrative is frequently embraced by fervent supporters of individuals in positions of power, who assert that those at the top are the true victims. They are depicted as victims of those in middle ranks, often citing the failure of those lower down to fulfil their responsibilities properly. In certain cases, particularly in Iran, this narrative may be reinforced by invoking the concept of “omission,” which refers to a legal offense where an individual intentionally refrains from fulfilling their legal duties. By attributing blame to those in middle ranks, the narrative serves as a shield to protect those in power from criticism, allowing them to evade accountability.³⁶

In essence, the adoption of victimhood narrative is a strategic response by those in power to maintain their authority and deflect criticism. It not only avoids addressing the core issues raised by *parrhesia* but also seeks to reshape the narrative in their favour, often by blaming subordinates or external forces for the challenges faced.

Furthermore, the discussion of *parrhesia* in the context of *kairos*, as presented by Dyrberg³⁷ and Foucault, offers valuable insights into the dynamics of bold speech and the state’s response to it, particularly in the case of Mr. Nourizad and his declining influence.

Parrhesia, as emphasized by Foucault,³⁸ is inherently situational and adapts to specific circumstances, occasions, and audiences. It transcends conventional rules and rhetorical procedures, finding its essence in *kairos*, the critical and decisive moment or opportunity. *Parrhesia* demands not only the right timing but also courage and self-care, enabling individuals to act during these pivotal moments.

As observed in contemporary Iran, *parrhesia* is not a continuous and habitual practice but emerges in specific moments when individuals choose to speak truth boldly. These moments are exceptionally sincere and impactful, startling individuals and drawing attention to unjust actions, particularly when committed by those in positions of power. *Parrhesia* exerts a profound influence during these critical junctures.

However, the power and impact of *parrhesia* can diminish over time, leading it to become a routine activity for individuals reflecting their political or social stance. This pattern is evident in Mr. Nourizad's case, where his influence declined as he continued his critical letters to the leader. It's essential to recognise that *parrhesia* cannot be a sustained, enduring practice; its effectiveness relies on opportune moments.

The cumulative impact of repeated *parrhesiastic* acts by different individuals aimed at sources of authority can result in the integration of *parrhesia* into an individual's intrinsic political or social identity. It is also crucial to note that *parrhesia* carries the most weight when directed at sources of authority deemed "legitimate" by society. Nevertheless, its effectiveness diminishes when those in power lose their legitimacy due to widespread criticism, public recognition of their true nature, ongoing unrest and counterattacks mounted by those in positions of authority.

A frequently employed counterattack strategy is to claim that any action criticised by opponents is inherently correct. Authorities may contend that any

action provoking outrage from their primary adversaries, often Western powers and “their internal allies,” must be truthful and warranted. This acknowledgment underscores the reality that recurrent *parrhesiastic* acts typically trigger a defensive reaction from those in authority, thereby diminishing their effectiveness. Officials might become skilled at pre-emptively rationalising their actions, thereby reducing the impact of *parrhesia* over time, as it fails to prompt genuine introspection or an earnest response.³⁹ The Supreme leader once said “if we observe that our conduct fails to provoke anger or upset among the enemies of religion, Islam and Quranic authority, then we should question our own effectiveness.”⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this inquiry into the practice of *parrhesia* in the recent history of Iran has yielded several insights. Four specific cases were analysed to achieve multiple objectives: to provide contemporary examples of political *parrhesia* in accordance with both Pernot’s and Foucault’s interpretations, to reveal the recurring demands and themes in *parrhesiastic* acts, to examine the state’s responses characterised by resistance, victimhood narratives, and manipulation of *parrhesia*’s meaning, and to understand the factors that contribute to the diminishing impact of *parrhesia* over time.

These cases illustrated the diverse manifestations of political *parrhesia*, encompassing critiques by middle-rank officials addressing the ruling majority and citizens addressing the top ruler. They underscored the consistent demands for freedom of expression, the removal of censorship, opposition to dictatorship, and the defence of democratic principles. Additionally, *parrhesiastic* acts frequently served as warnings about the nation’s future and as calls to action against authoritarian rule.

The responses of the state, as revealed through its rhetoric, were characterised by a tripartite narrative: resistance against changing the values of the revolution, the portrayal of the state as a victim of external conspiracies, and the redefinition

of *parrhesia* as criticism primarily directed at Western powers. These responses aimed to deflect criticism, legitimise the state's actions, and shift blame for the nation's hardships to external actors.

An important finding of this inquiry was the recognition that the impact of *parrhesiastic* acts diminishes under certain circumstances. Repetition of criticism without consideration of opportune moments (*kairos*) and the loss of legitimacy by those in power were identified as key factors contributing to this decline in effectiveness. When those in authority lose their legitimacy, *parrhesia* may still be a dangerous act, but its capacity to provoke genuine reflection or response diminishes.⁴¹

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NOTES

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2. Gladys Thomas Goodnight, "Parrhesia: The Aesthetics of Arguing Truth to Power." OSSA Conference Archive 51, 2007, <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA7/papersandcommentaries/51>.
3. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Ed. Joseph Pearson. New York: Semiotext(e), 2001.
4. John Townsend, "Political Rhetoric: The Modern Parrhesia." *The Catalyst* 4: 1, 2017.
5. Ibid.
6. "Letter of Ninety." The Islamic Republic News Agency, <https://www.irna.ir/news/85038763/>
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8. John Townsend, "Political Rhetoric."
9. Refer to a podcast provided by BBC Persian Radio, research done by Hossein Bastani:
10. Farzad Nemati, "A Report on the Evenings of Iranian Writers and Poets at the Goethe Institute." Official News Agency, October 2016, <https://hammihanonline.ir/news/culture/ب‌ی‌ش‌ن‌-‌ه‌د‌-‌ب‌ا‌ت‌ه‌م>
11. Ibid.
12. Faced challenges in his creative work after the revolution, leading him to seek refuge in the United States and eventually becoming a professor at Stanford University.
13. Was compelled to leave Iran after the revolution due to threats to his life, ultimately finding refuge in France.
14. Left Iran two years after the revolution and continued his writing and political activities in exile.
15. Left Iran following the revolution, collaborated with the Iran Liberation Front, and tragically took his own life following the death of a close friend.
16. Currently lives in France
17. Left Iran after two years from the execution of his friend.
18. Passed away in the United States.
19. Faced pressure after the revolution and spent years in prison.
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31. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
32. Goodnight, “The Aesthetics of Arguing Truth to Power.”
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41. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Valery Vino for introducing me to the topic of Parrhesia and for inviting me to explore it further. Furthermore, I am deeply grateful to the reviewers of this paper whose insightful feedback significantly enhanced its quality.

**kopenawa's shamanic
parrhesia: wasp spirits vs.
white climate epidemic**

joshua m. hall

SHAMANIC PARRHESIA IN *THE GUARDIAN*

In his 2014 article in *The Guardian*, “‘People in the west live squeezed together, frenzied as wasps in the nest’: An indigenous Yanomami leader and shaman from Brazil shares his views on wealth, the environment and politics,” former environment editor John Vidal explains that the parrhesia therein from Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa is “taken from his autobiography and conversations at Survival International’s offices in London” (the latter being a human rights NGO that specializes in Indigenous land rights).¹ Vidal recalls his first meeting with the Kopenawa, during the latter’s first visit to London, as follows:

As we went down the escalator into the London Underground I could see he was nervous. All these white people rushing around under the city must be spirits or ghosts, he said. When we emerged, he was himself nearly white, shaken from his cosmological introduction to Britain.

According to Yanomami cosmology, the spirits are a class of beings who used to live on the surface of the earth, but who have since been buried by a previously fallen sky; thus, by going underground Kopenawa would be entering their realm, which is considered enormously dangerous since the spirits are believed to hunt and eat humans in exactly the same way that humans hunt and eat other species. But since Vidal does not mention this context, that leads the reader to falsely imagine Kopenawa as comically anxious and fearful, when in fact he is a courageous cultural ambassador of the Yanomami to the Global North, having (in Vidal's words) "been dubbed the Dalai Lama of the Rainforest," and "considered one of the most influential tribal leaders in Brazil." Thus, despite Vidal's implied sympathy for Kopenawa and his cause, this introductory section reaffirms a racist stereotype of Indigenous persons, thereby undermining the authority Kopenawa needs for his words to have their desired political effects.

After this brief reminiscence of his first meeting with Kopenawa, the rest of Vidal's article is divided into fifteen brief topics, whose main points I will now rehearse. First, Kopenawa sees England as overpopulated with spirits, perhaps because its people's "ancestors did not take care of the forest in which they came into being the way ours did." Second, he criticizes how the English have "innumerable possessions but their elders never give them to anyone," unlike the Yanomami, who demand generosity from all, and especially those with exceptional resources. Third, Kopenawa decries the global impacts of capitalism, perpetuated by white people who "do not seem concerned that they are making us all perish with the epidemic of fumes" – the latter being Kopenawa's shamanic ontology of the pollution behind climate change – "that escape from all these things." Fourth,

Kopenawa finds New York frightening, especially in its treatment of the poor, remarking that “These white men are greedy and do not take care of those among them who have nothing.” Fifth, he relates the pathological symptoms of his experience in big cities: “Whenever I stay there too long I become restless and cannot dream.” Sixth, he excoriates white people for continuing to exacerbate climate change: “they constantly devastate the land they live on and transform the waters they drink into quagmires!” Seventh, he challenges the racist stereotype of his Yanomami people as “warlike,” and denounces how white people make war in large part “to grab new land for minerals, to tear minerals out of the land.” Eighth, he contrasts white peoples’ pathological greed with the more natural erotic attunement of the Yanomami: “They go to sleep thinking about it like we doze off with the nostalgia of a beautiful woman.” Ninth, he objects that white people’s politics “is nothing but mixed-up talk, the words of people who try to deceive.” Tenth, he criticises alcohol abuse as facilitating a (pejorative) animality: “They drink beer and, having become ghosts, face off like chickens or starving dogs until they have killed each other.” Eleventh, he laments how “white people work in a ghost state and constantly swallow the wind of factory and machine fumes.” Twelfth, he criticises the word “environment,” objecting that “What they refer to in this way is what remains of everything they have destroyed so far.” Thirteenth, he claims that meaningful speech is impossible for white people, living where the “roar of the machines and motors stands in the way of all the other sounds.” Fourteenth, he expresses wonder at white people’s appetite for destruction: “But where do the white people get this fierce desire to destroy the forest and its inhabitants?” And fifteenth, he bemoans how these tragedies span lifetimes and generations, observing that once white people’s “hair is white they disappear and the work – which never dies – survives them without end.”

Telescoping these critiques, the overall pattern is that “white people” – which for Kopenawa also includes Latinx people such as his fellow Brazilians – are more like the evil spirits of the Yanomami than like other human beings, as evidenced by pathologically extreme appetites for death, destruction, and sickening, more

specifically like the most mindless and greedy of the dangerous species in their world, namely wild pigs.

The reader familiar with Kopenawa and anthropological scholarship on him (as opposed to my own background in philosophy, where there has been, to the best of my knowledge, no engagement with him whatsoever), would likely want to balance my inventory of his bracing *parrhesia* with his celebrated diplomacy. This is the dominant theme, for example, of a special issue of *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* devoted to reviews of *The Falling Sky*, Kopenawa's 622-page memoir, transcribed and edited by his longtime collaborator, French anthropologist Bruce Alpert.² It is also the centrepiece of the anthropological analyses of Aníbal G. Arregui.³ Though I grant the central importance of what Arregui calls "environmental diplomacy" to Kopenawa's work as a whole, in the present investigation I am concerned exclusively with the dimension of his work that aligns with the concept of *parrhesia*, which as I understand it requires a bracing and unvarnished directness that is inherently incompatible with diplomatic speech's necessary indirection, artifice, subterfuge, and even "betrayal," as Arregui notes.⁴ In other words, I am suggesting that part of Kopenawa's power is his *parrhesia*, which requires moments that risk his diplomacy in pursuit of a truth sharp enough to cut the bonds of apathy and entitlement, which continue to imprison most white people in the immobility of their vicious status quo.⁵

A different aspect of Arregui's analyses, though, is of central importance to the present investigation, namely an emphasis on the dancing dimension of Kopenawa's shamanism. While neither the special issue of *Hau* nor Arregui's essays emphasise dance explicitly, Arregui does emphasise three aspects of Kopenawa's communication that directly resonate with my own Figuration philosophy of dance.⁶ In brief, Arregui (1) affirms Kopenawa's "gestures" and "positionings" (two of the central aspects of dance in Figuration); (2) centres "the space in between these bodies" and the spontaneous improvisation of Kopenawa and his allies' publicly performed activism (like the improvisational Afro-Latin jazz dance of salsa that inspired Figuration); and (3) triangulates the "equivocal" discourses

of coloniser and Indigenous with the material crisis of an injustice-imperilled earth (like the explicit social and ecological justice comportment of Figuration).⁷ In part for these reasons, I have elsewhere channelled Kopenawa's *parrhesia* into an assemblage of reconstructed spiritual practices of the global disempowered, which I call "Spirit/Dance" (to which I return in my conclusion).⁸

DANCING PARRHESIA IN *THE FALLING SKY*

Having begun with Kopenawa's foray into the world of contemporary journalism, in Vidal's article in *The Guardian*, I now turn to *The Falling Sky*. I begin with a summary of Kopenawa's account of Yanomami shamanism, central to both his life and the book. In brief, Yanomami shamans ingest a hallucinogenic substance, namely *yãkoana* powder derived from the sap of local trees, to generate visions of "spirits" (as Albert translates the Yanomami word *xapiri*).⁹ Kopenawa's descriptions of these spirits suggest a cross between the Euro-American concept of "fairies" and "angels" (the latter being what "the missionaries call" these spirits, according to Kopenawa) (Kopenawa, 208). Crucially for the Yanomami, the spirits' entire being, as well as their communications with the shamans, consists of elaborate dances, which Kopenawa compares to images, television, movies, and photographs. This suggests that the spirit dances might be the figurative dances of lines and colors, on surfaces and in imagination, and thus potentially more accessible to white people.

More precisely, when fed by the *yãkoana* powder (i.e., when the shaman inhales the tree sap powder), the *xapiri* literally alter the shaman's body to render him capable of receiving and understanding their dancing messages. These spirits' dances are performed on shiny reflective surfaces (which Kopenawa calls "mirrors"), onto which the spirits descend, along gossamer-thin lines, from their palatial mansions in the skies. "As fine and translucent as spider webs or fishing lines," Kopenawa relates, "the *xapiri*'s shining paths will become fixed along our arms and legs" (referring to the limbs of an experienced Yanomami shaman) (Kopenawa, 378). "Then the spirits will come down along them to tear our chest and open a large

clearing in it where they will be do their presentation dance,” Kopenawa concludes, the interpretation of which dance is the shaman’s constant, lifelong occupation (378). According to Yanomami oral history, the first ever shaman was the son of their creator god, *Omama*, who instructed his son in the shamanic art, in part, as follows: “Hold up the sky so it does not fall apart” (32). Kopenawa updates this warning as the imperative to avert a global climate catastrophe, to which he has dedicated his life. “Following on from” this mythical first shaman, Kopenawa claims, “many of our elders became shamans,” and “He taught them to make the spirits dance” (33).

From Albert’s outsider perspective, though, this practice initially looked unrecognisably different. “The [shamans] appear to be doing everything possible to impress their hosts with the exuberance of their performance,” he writes, recalling his “first experience of the elaborate chants, sumptuous ornamentation, and impressive *choreography* of such shamanic opera” (Kopenawa, 437, emphasis added). For Kopenawa, too, the core of the spirits is dancing, as is clear from his own simple explanation of the same event: “They were making the spirits dance together” (437). Thus, the dance of the spirits is performatively identical to the dance of the shamans. To this, I would add that this gestural, nonverbal language of dance is also important in the context of Kopenawa’s *parrhesia*, and represents a discourse that is at once more intuitively accessible (as motion in the shared spaces of our world) and also more resistant to verbal translation, equivocation, and the other modes of metaphysical and cosmopolitical discursive encounter that dominate the concerns of the special issue of *Hau*. As Albert notes in his reply to these reviewers, one must not lose sight of the life-and-death dimension of this work for Kopenawa, the same person whose bodily and cultural vulnerability are vividly expressed in the true form of the spirits and shaman’s work, namely dance (336-337).¹⁰

In support of this emphasis on dance’s gestural language, Kopenawa constantly emphasises that the purpose of this spirit-dancing is a form of linguistic communication. “It is these spirits’ words that I make heard,” he insists, and

“not just my own thought” (Kopenawa, 314). As Albert puts it in his afterword, “the ‘I’ of Davi Kopenawa’s account also embodies the voices of many shamanic ‘images’ of animal ancestors and cosmological beings” (447). Therefore, Albert suggests, these interviews with Kopenawa amount to “shamanic intercultural exchanges” (448). And these exchanges’ central message is a completely original new “shamanic prophecy about the smoke of gold, the death of the shamans, and the falling sky,” created by Kopenawa in inspirited conversation with his father-in-law, who remains the chief shaman of their community. This prophecy, Albert describes in an appendix as “joining shamanism with ethnopolitics,” and “our cultural collaboration in defense of the Yanomami cause” (440, 441). More specifically, “by initiating Davi Kopenawa in shamanism,” his father-in-law “was able to work with him to elaborate a cosmological and political interpretation of the white world’s encroachment, one that proved very effective for defending Yanomami rights in general and his community’s rights in particular” (474). As a result, “By the end of these 1980s, these statements were carried by all the major media in Brazil and internationally” (475). Finally, Kopenawa “compelled the Brazilian government to pass a decree that officially guaranteed the Yanomami land rights” (475).

Shifting from the medium of Kopenawa’s *parrhesia* to his audience, he objects that white people “don’t think very far ahead,” and therefore beseeches them as follows: “I would like the white people to stop thinking that our forest is dead and placed here without reason,” and to “make them listen to the voice of the *xapiri* [the spirits] who play here incessantly, dancing on their glittering mirrors” (Kopenawa, 12). The source of this difficulty, more precisely, lies with the words of white people, which in Kopenawa’s view are ontologically deficient. With these words that are “are so different,” he concedes that these white folks “are probably clever,” and yet “they badly lack wisdom” (13). Humorously, he later claims that the sound of this white talk derives ultimately from “*Remori*, the ancestor of the big orange *remoremo moxi* bee,” who “gave white people their twisted tongue” (164). “Doesn’t their talk,” he prompts, “resemble the buzzing of the bumblebees?”

(164). By contrast, “the words of *Omama*,” the highest divinity in the Yanomami religion, “are very old, yet the shamans constantly renew them” (13).

Lingering on the subject of language, Kopenawa relates that white people are responsible for his own first name. “It was they who named me ‘Davi’,” he writes, “before my own people had even given me a nickname to follow the custom of our elders,” an example of what he calls white folks having “distributed their names to us without restraint” (Kopenawa, 18). This is important because, for the Yanomami, “it is an insult to pronounce someone’s name in his presence or that of his people” (18). Additionally, white people are indirectly responsible for Davi’s last name, because even though “Kopenawa” is “a real Yanomami name” – which refers to a species of wasp, and “comes from the wasp spirits who absorbed the blood spilled by *Arowë*, a great warrior of the beginning of time” – the spirits “gave me this name,” he relates, “because of the rage inside me to face the white people” (19).

Kopenawa then elaborates on this experience with his namesake wasp spirits, in the following passage:

My wife’s father, the great man of our Watoriki house at the foot of the Mountain of the Wind, had made me drink the powder that the shamans extract from the *yãkoana hi* tree. Under the effects of its power, I saw the spirits of the *kopena* wasps come down to me. They told me: “We are by your side and will protect you. This is why you will take the name Kopenawa!” It is so. This name comes from the wasp spirits who absorbed the blood spilled by *Arowë*, a great warrior of the beginning of time. My father-in-law made their images come down and gave them to me with his breath of life. Then I was able to see them dance for the first time (Kopenawa, 19).

Not again the centrality of dance. As with the *kopena* wasps, many other animal species possess spirits, according to Yanomami, as do other natural phenomena. “The sun and moon,” for example, “possess images that only the shamans can bring

down and make dance,” Kopenawa explains. “They have a human appearance, like us, but the white people cannot know them” (Kopenawa, 29). The reason for this inability is that

the white people’s way of thinking is other. Their memory is clever but entangled in smoky and obscure words. The path of their thought is often twisted and thorny. They do not truly know the things of the forest. They contemplate paper skins on which they have drawn their own words for hours. If they do not follow their lines, their thought gets lost (23).

Turning from the words of the white people to the perspective on the Yanomami expressed therein and shaped thereby, Kopenawa writes that “Today, white people think we should imitate them in every way,” but “this is not what we want” (Kopenawa, 22). Except, that is, on the following condition: “I think we will only be able to become white people the day white people transform themselves into Yanomami” (22). Until this hypothetical mutual transformation, though, one Yanomami difference that Kopenawa is anxious to maintain is that the spirits’ words “become new again each time they return to dance for a young shaman,” whereas white people “contemplate paper skins on which they have drawn their own words for hours” (23). Kopenawa’s contempt for this method notwithstanding, in the hopes that white people’s “thought about us will cease being so dark and twisted and maybe they will even wind up losing the will to destroy us,” he consented to having his “account drawn in the white people’s language so it could be heard far from the forest” (23). On this note of practicality, however, and returning to the issue of names, he notes that this last, ethnic name is one whose meaning must remain unknown to white people: “They want to know what our name Yanomami means,” but “We want to protect our name,” in part because “Sometimes we are scared that the white people will finish us off” (25).

In an appendix, Albert describes the worst of this white savagery against the Yanomami, what has since become known as the Haximu Massacre, as follows:

Twelve Yanomami are savagely assassinated: two adult women, an old man, a young woman in her twenties who was visiting from *Hoomoxi*, three adolescents, two baby girls (a one-year-old and a three-year-old), and three boys ranging in age from six to eight years old... One of the old women, who is blind, is kicked to death. A baby sleeping in a hammock is wrapped in a scrap of cotton fabric and knifed to death (Kopenawa, 483).

Later, the “Haxima Massacre was legally characterized and judged as an attempt at genocide,” which “ruling was an unprecedented act in the history of Brazilian jurisprudence regarding the massacre of an Indian group” (Kopenawa, 487).

To explain white people’s distorted perspective on the Yanomami, Kopenawa zooms out from the present to their cosmological ancestry, which includes what he calls “the *napënapëri* spirits of the city white people’s ancestors” (Kopenawa, 161). These spirits, he elaborates, “look like white people, but compared to them they [the spirits] are very beautiful,” as well as being “wrapped in uniforms,” with their eyes “hidden by shining metal skins” (that is, eyeglasses) (161). Despite these differences, however, ultimately these “white people’s spirits are the images of” a “group of Yanomami ancestors carried away by a flood and turned into outsiders by *Omama*” (162). In short, these white people’s spirits are “The ghosts of the first white people,” who “taught today’s white people to build airplanes, machines to capture songs, and image skins” (162). Moreover, these white *xapiri* are the only ones who “truly know the *xawara* epidemic smoke, for it comes from the white people,” and for this reason “tirelessly protect” white people “from the epidemics that spread there,” which is “why the white people do not die of the epidemic fumes as much as we do!” (162). Thus, unbeknownst to the white people, they descend from the Yanomami, being merely a lost, forgetful, and devastating once-Indigenous people.

Perhaps because of this shared Yanomami origin, at one point in Kopenawa’s life, when the “epidemic beings, whom we call *xawarari*, had severely struck and wounded” him, “the spirits of the white people’s ancestors” came down to

Kopenawa and “rushed in to battle the *xawarari* beings who threatened to devour” him (Kopenawa, 163). This deliverance by the white people’s spirits, moreover, established a long-term relationship between them and Kopenawa. “Since then,” he relates, “I have continued to call down these white people’s ancestors’ *xapiri* who so valiantly avenged me” (163). Crucially for his climate change activism, this working relationship continues to empower Kopenawa to “share their words with those who listen to me when I become spirit myself” (163).

Going back in time to his own first encounter with white people, Kopenawa admits that he “found them frighteningly ugly and my heart was beating hard in my chest” (Kopenawa, 175). Though “the elders of the time feared the white people’s anger and their epidemics,” at first, by the time of Kopenawa’s writing, “our children no longer fear the white people” (175). His memories of white people’s earliest injustices against his people give him the anger “that has never left me since” (177). “It is the anger,” Kopenawa elaborates, “that makes me fight today against those outsiders who think only of burning the forest’s trees and soiling its rivers like hordes of peccaries [wild hogs]” (177). This rage only deepened as Kopenawa lost first his uncle, and then his mother, to [literal] epidemics from the white people” (198). Additionally, a Brazilian missionary, who had preached against extramarital sex, slept with numerous Yanomami women, impregnated one married woman, and took a young girl for his wife, which ultimately cost the missionary his religious position, and persuaded the Yanomami that the Christian god does not exist (200). In particular, Kopenawa’s stepfather, after failing to save his friend’s life through a Christian healing, “began denouncing” the gospel “as a lie of the white people” (204).

Though thus disillusioned regarding religious white people, Kopenawa later accepted employment with the secular government officials from FUNAI, the National Indian Foundation of Brazil. He remembers that he “liked living with the white people and carrying out the tasks they gave me,” and that he “really wanted to know them better and even imitate them” (Kopenawa, 212). In fact, this desire went still further. “I told myself: ‘why not imitate the white people and become

one of them?” (213). Pursuing that goal, Kopenawa “constantly observed them in silence, paying tremendous attention to them,” being “already used to wearing shorts,” and also familiar with “flip-flops” (213). Then, during a long hospital recovery from tuberculosis, Kopenawa became fluent in Portuguese, and “lost my fear of speaking to white people” (218). Once cured, however, he “decided to come back and live in the forest on my own,” where, “little by little the desire to become a white man disappeared from my mind” (219).

Even worse than the missionaries and government officials, though, were the gold prospectors, whom the Yanomami call “land eaters,” or “outsider peccary spirits,” because they relentlessly dig into the ground and burrow in the mud like wild pigs looking for earthworms” (Kopenawa, 263). In his inaugural experience with political activism, Kopenawa marshalled a small group of Yanomami warriors to block the prospectors’ efforts. Initially proceeding “to encircle the white people’s camp, bows taut, ready to shoot our arrows,” they found themselves outnumbered, and thus were forced to return later to the prospectors’ camp with a larger force (264). In the meantime, the land eaters killed “the man whom I called father-in-law,” after which they hung his body “in the forest,” which moved Kopenawa to the grim conclusion that “the white people who want to take our land are evil beings” (269, 270). Refusing their bribes to “make a great chief” of him, Kopenawa threatened them as follows: “Leave before you make us angry and before your mothers have to mourn your death!” (273). Eventually, Kopenawa and his fellow warriors kidnapped the leader of the land eaters, painting him “from head to toe with a black dye made of annatto pulp and soot,” after which he “never tried to come back to our home, nor did any other *garimpeiro* [prospector] for that matter!” (274).

The thing that makes the land eaters evil in Kopenawa’s view, and not merely humanly vicious, is that their actions go beyond the level of ethics, to the level of metaphysics. To wit, Kopenawa describes the “minerals and oil” sought by the prospectors as “evil and dangerous things, saturated with coughs and fevers” (Kopenawa, 282). The reason for the minerals’ inherent toxicity, according to

Kopenawa's reconstructed shamanic discourse, is that today's "forest is the flesh and skin of our earth, which is the back of the old sky *Hutukara* that fell in the beginning of time" (238). Thus, the metal that "*Omama* hid in its soil is its [the old sky's] skeleton, which the forest surrounds in human coolness" (283). More specifically, "What the white people call 'minerals' are the fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down at the beginning of time" (283). Worse still, underneath this oil and these minerals is what Kopenawa calls "the father of gold," whose spirit "appears to us as an underground mountain in the depth of the ground in order to hold the earth in place and prevent the thunder and lightning's anger from tearing it apart" (286). If this gold-being is ever unearthed, Kopenawa claims, "The sky will fall apart again, and every last one of us will be annihilated" (287). In the meantime, when the gold's "blood evaporates in the big pots of white people's factories," then "As it dies, it lets off the dangerous heat of its breath," or "gold smoke," which "poison fouls white people's bodies without their knowing" (288). And this, finally, is "the same *xawara* epidemic smoke, and it is truly our enemy" (288).

CONCLUSION: SPIRIT-DANCING ALLIES

Fortunately, however, Kopenawa can name at least some genuine white kindred spirits and allies in the cause to save the rainforest. "Chico Mendes," he writes of the celebrated labor, environmental, and pro-Indigenous leader, "was a white man, but he grew up like us, in the middle of the forest"; and as such "refused to cut down and burn all its trees," having instead "taken the forest for a friend and loved its beauty," wanting the forest "to remain the way it was created" (Kopenawa, 394). Hearing Mendes' words for the first time, Kopenawa

... instantly thought: "This man is truly wise! His breath of life and his blood is like ours. Maybe he is a son-in-law of *Omama*, like we are?" Then I wanted to talk to him, but right before I could meet him forest-eating white people killed him in an ambush (Kopenawa, 395).

Moreover, there is at least one entire group of white people in Kopenawa's memoir who emerge virtuous, namely the Pro-Yanomami Commission (CCPY), whom he introduces as some "other white people," different from FUNAI, who "had also started talking about defending our forest" (Kopenawa, 252).¹¹ The difference, in part is that FUNAI "had never told me that I had to fight for it [the forest] myself!" (253). But CCPY did, and it was they, Kopenawa continues, who "started helping me to travel and speak in the big cities to defend our land" (253). According to his reconstructed shamanic discourse, "the ancient white people once drew their land to cut it up" with the cartographic lines of their maps; thus, today, "the white people's thought remains full of forgetting," not knowing "how to dream or make their ancestors' images dance" (255). The Yanomami believe that they can communicate with the ancient white people's spirits, however; for example, "the images of oxen and horses, the white people ancestors' first pets, also came down and let us hear their worries about the burned land of the big farms alongside the roads" (257). Reaffirming the centrality of this spirit dancing communication yet again, Kopenawa admits that "If we did not know anything of the *xapiri*, we would also know nothing of the forest, and we would be as oblivious as the white people" (257). Perhaps, then, if white people can remember or relearn the spirit, they can help solve their climate crisis.

On this note, of the three main global religious traditions on which Spirit/Dance draws, I have published the most about the one closest to my own predominantly Indo-European ancestry, namely the Dionysian Mysteries (which scholars have shown to be intimately connected to the Hindu sect of Shivaism).¹² This Indo-European focus is intended, in part, to honour the current Dalai Lama's advice to westerners to dig for buried spiritual treasures in their own traditions, rather than rushing abroad to forage for those resources in unfamiliar traditions (such as his own Tibetan Buddhism).¹³ To summarise the results of my previous research on the Dionysian Mysteries, I have attempted to show how (1) since Nietzsche's pivotal writings, most scholars and writers have ignored or suppressed Dionysus's androgyny and his advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners,

the city, democracy, and peace; (2) a marginalised line of scholarship recovers Euripides' figuration of Dionysus' (and Shiva's) political progressiveness along exactly these axes of gender, race, class, nationality, etc.; and (3) numerous attempted wars of liberation in Ancient Rome were fought under the banner of Dionysus, including the slave revolt of Spartacus, whose paramour was a priestess of the god, preaching that Spartacus was divinely chosen by him for a mission of liberation.¹⁴ The main point here for Spirit/Dance is that there is a major political dimension to the Dionysian (and Shaivite) tradition that has been suppressed in Western history. This is vividly illustrated by the fact that, during ancient Athens' largest annual Dionysian festival, a standing reward was offered for anyone who brought to the city the decapitated head of a tyrant. Despite this rich political history of social justice revolution, many popular figures in the Global North that were originally derived from Dionysus have been censoriously stripped of that inheritance and its associated political valence. For example, the name of Scottish playwright J. M. Barrie's titular character, "Peter Pan" is an intentional allusion to "Pan," a Greek forest deity that overlaps significantly with Dionysus."

In sum, the most important contribution from the Dionysian Mysteries to Spirit/Dance is the positing of dance as central to its spiritual practices. More specifically, a community healer should not only be a dancer, but also incorporate one or more literal or figurative kinds of dancing into their healing work. In short, certain kinds of dance are inherently healing, and a community healer should heal through dance. As for the second tradition on which Spirit/Dance draws, Vodou's most important contribution thereto is the positing of the community healer's dance as necessarily channelling an indefinite number of spirits into an improvisational community performance. In short, the dance of healing involves, not just one dancing healer, but indefinitely many figurative fellow-dancers; each seeming solo is, in truth, an ensemble. This is one reason why the dancer's openness to spontaneity and creative adaptation in healing is essential. And the most important contribution of the third tradition, Kopenawa's shamanism, to Spirit/Dance is its positing of not only the community healer, but also the spiritual figures whom they channel

in their dancing, as essentially dancing beings. In short, these interpreted dances constitute the fundamental form of spiritual communication. Moreover, these healing dances are not mere catalysts for revolution; they are the revolution itself, which has already begun as soon as the dance has begun, and will end if the dance does. Finally, this revolutionary healing dance must always be sustained, because it is necessary if our existence as the 99% is to become bearable, including in the context of impending climate catastrophe. In other words, it is not too late to dance; it is only too late not to start dancing.

Returning, on this note, from Spirit/Dance to Kopenawa, and by way of conclusion, though he has since found additional would-be white allies, he challenges them to match their actions to their lofty environmental rhetoric. “Now that the white people have invented their ‘ecology’ talk,” he cautions, “they must not only repeat it in vain to make new lies out of it” (Kopenawa, 396). Instead, “They must really protect the forest and all those who live there” (396). This is Kopenawa’s fondest hope, including for admittedly selfish reasons. “If the white people became wiser at last,” he hopes, “my mind could become calm and joyful again,” at which point he “would hide in the forest with my elders to drink the *yãkoana* until it made me very thin again and I forgot the city” (399, 400). In the meantime, though, tirelessly holding up the fragile sky, Kopenawa concludes his memoir with praise for the spirits, in whose honor I conclude my own effort here as well:

They are valiant and magnificent. Their songs make our thoughts grow and keep them strong. This is why we will continue to make their images dance and defend their houses as long as we are alive. We are inhabitants of the forest, and this is our way of being. These are the words I truly want to make the white people understand (Kopenawa, 423).

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NOTES

1. John Vidal, "People in the West Live Squeezed Together, Frenzied as Wasps in the Nest." *The Guardian*, December 30, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/dec/30/western-living-yanomami-shaman-brazil>.
2. As Alpert explains, "in the United States," the Yanomami "had become (in)famous as the 'Fierce People,' predisposed to almost Hobbesian warfare, as in Napoleon Chagnon's book (1968)." This and all parenthetical references are taken from Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. Trans Alison Dundy. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013, 427.
3. See, for example, Aníbal G. Arregui, "This Mess is a 'World!' Environmental Diplomats in the Mud of Anthropology." *Indigenous Perceptions of the End of the World: Creating a Cosmopolitics of Change*. Ed Rosalyn Bold, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 183-202.
4. Arregui, "This Mess," 194.
5. For more on the necessity of painful encounters to expanding white people's moral imagination, see Joshua M. Hall, "The Necessary Pain of Moral Imagination: Lonely Delegation in Richard Wright's *Haiku and White Man, Listen!*" *Evental Aesthetics* 7:1 (2018, 62-89).
6. For a summary of Figuration and its application to reconstructive decolonising practice, see Joshua M. Hall, "Afro-Latin Dance as Reconstructive Gestural Discourse: The Figuration Philosophy of Dance on Salsa." *Research in Dance Education* 22:1, 2020, 73-87.
7. Arregui, "This Mess," 183, 184, 190, 196.
8. Joshua M. Hall, "Introducing Spirit/Dance: Reconstructed Spiritual Practices." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* (forthcoming).
9. The translator elaborates on the xapiri in an endnote, as follows: "Any existing being has an 'image' (utupë) from the original times, an image which shamans can 'call,' 'bring down,' and 'make dance' as an 'auxiliary spirit' (xapiri a). These primordial image-beings ('spirits') are described as miniscule humanoids, wearing extremely bright, colorful feather ornaments, and body paint. Among the eastern Yanomami, the word for 'spirits' (plur. xapiri pë) also refers to shamans (xapiri t ë pë). Practicing shamanism is referred to as xapiripruu). These expressions refer to the fact that, during the shamanic trance, the shaman identifies with the 'auxiliary spirits' he is calling" (Kopenawa, 490n3).
10. Bruce Albert, "The Falling Sky: In Lieu of a Response." *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4:2, 2014, 335-337.
11. As one of the creators of this organisation, Albert describes the CCPY as "an NGO that fought for almost thirty years to defend the rights of the Yanomami until they founded their own organization – the Hutukara Associação Yanomami," of which Kopenawa "has served as president" since "its founding in 2004" (Kopenawa, 435).
12. For more, see Alain Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*. Reprint edition, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1992.
13. Tenzin Gyatso, *The Essence of the Heart Sutra: The Dalai Lama's Heart of Wisdom Teachings*. Trans Thupten Jinpa, New York: Wisdom, 2005.
14. For more, see Joshua M. Hall, "Pregnant Materialist Natural Law: Bloch and Spartacus' Priestess of Dionysus." *Idealistic Studies* 52:2, 2022, 111-132.

**when the witnesses in war
stop waiting for a necrotic
peace: a contemplation
on nelson maldonado's
against war**

gwendalynn roebke

WALKING THROUGH THE CENTRAL PROJECT(S) OF *AGAINST WAR*

In his book *Against War*, Dr. Nelson Maldonado Torres (Nelson M-T) sets himself the task of explaining the essential entanglement of the development of Western modernity with the formal structuralisation of social relations of conflict and violence. Through his characterisation of “*the death ethic*” behind modernity’s settler colonial projects and the presentation of a “*paradigm of war*,” Nelson M-T lays out why it is that modernity necessitates a state of perpetual violence: to set apart the Other from the dominating citizen of modernity. It is through perpetual violence inflicted by a colonising “warrior,” “modernizing” class that the Other

can be named, maintained in a subordinate status, and made a fungible object (non-subject). By placing our social relations and epistemic footing in a perpetual conflict, the everlasting war of modernity captures people in an unrelenting state of coloniality.

In his text, Nelson M-T pushes us to understand that the endless reality of violence present in our contemporary lives can be traced through the living legacies of western modernity and coloniality. Tracing a genealogy of modernity's violent inception of rendering subaltern "Others," *Against War* works between history and theory, and indeed deploys a meta-analysis of the historicity behind modernity's theorising that enables practices of violent domination.

But Nelson M-T's book is not solely propelled by an interest in merely understanding how modernity's ethic of death, of war, underpins the rendering of Others. Rather, Nelson M-T's project of understanding the paradigm of war in modernity is moved forward by his interest in presenting a means of resistance to such a dire state of affairs. To struggle against a reality of war imposed by colonial modernity, one must look towards violent structures of otherisation and seek to upend them. To speak up against the violence of modernity, is to speak to and engage in the recognition of the Other. Nelson M-T sees the need to reach the subalternised Other in a radical politics of recognition and becoming which he coins *altercity*. By building up a counter politic of becoming the Other and being moved to act through their death, altercity extends itself beyond a mere fraternity to pose a radical, decolonial notion of solidarity between the peripheralised. It is in altercity that Nelson M-T's project extols the capacity of people to engage in decolonial work through a potent love. It is this love, this altercity, that stands to dissolve the death ethic of coloniality, and bring about liberation from modernity's stagnating violence of otherisation.

In what follows of my meditations on Nelson M-T's work in *Against War*, I hone in on the centrality of altercity in understanding his project, and the potential of the marginalised to boldly speak truth to power through love.

THE INTERVIEW, INTERROGATING THE PARADIGM AND THE PLAYERS

A Conversation with Dr. Maldonado-Torres around Violence and Vocal Love (Altericity)

Surely, we are not talking about the paradigm of war anymore.

This was my, perhaps too brash, first question to Nelson M-T as we sat over zoom discussing his book *Against War*.

I came into the conversation with a series of rejections. A rejection of the usage of dominant western academic works from figures like Levinas, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Hegel to build a framework for hearing the subaltern. A rejection of the lack of engagement with critical Marxist¹ projects despite their seeming relevancy. A rejection of operating through the paradigm of war itself as both a relic and a counterproductive yielding to the western neo-liberal ways of understanding that the book seems to want to shake free from.

When it came time to talk with Nelson M-T, screen to screen, I was ready to push this third and most central rejection. How could we be talking about this paradigm of war, still, to make sense of what seemed so abundantly to be a different articulation of mass violence, misery, and exploitation? In my question, there contained an implicit, burning criticism, which asked why should we care about “war” as conceived as a fundamental way of ordering the world given the onslaught of modernity when the sheer violence of our surroundings demands a linguistic paradigm shift to take full stock. We have entered into spectating violences that transcend the language of war.

It is to his credit that Nelson M-T responded to the central rejections I posed without ambivalence. Instead, he offered an invitation to further understand his project.

Nelson M-T spoke at length about the dangerous misstep to seek a “newness” to the violence manifesting across the world. He said the paradigm of war in his project purposefully acts to speak of what the malicious false promises of modernity and

the impact of coloniality make us: people content with the violence and corrosive processes of othering that surround us. The unique “nowness” I was trying to put forward neglected to recognise that what we were seeing now was and is as colonialism intended.

Nelson M-T calmly offered the following rebuttal to my rejection:

While there is a qualitative transformation of the state of war, the core paradigm persists.

Throughout our conversation I did not back down from my concerns.

But again, Nelson M-T was equal in his resolve to help me understand the key motivations of his project, and the usage of the language of war. What we were talking about in war was for him, the reduction of the othered masses via coloniality, liberalism, capitalism, into combatants who qualified for extermination for the sole purpose that they stand in empire’s way. The language of war was the “language of catastrophe to which coloniality is bound.”

After our conversation ended, I realised I had mislaid the most important part of Nelson M-T’s project in my commitment to my critique: altericity.

While discussing the violence of coloniality is important in *Against War*, the key task in the book is not to muddle through a purely intellectual project that devises the perfect label for the atrocities that come from coloniality. Rather, what Nelson M-T brings forth in *Against War* is a call to action, a call for love, that stands to upend the colonial reality of normalised atrocity. To focus on finding a newness to war, and not on love, on the altericity that stands to challenge it, is a grave misreading of Nelson M-T’s project.

Nelson M-T defines the concept of altericity thusly:

I find in this period a turn from fraternity to *a more radical ethical conception* that I term altericity. *Altericity refers to a radical act of giving that is driven*

by an unequaled concern for the death of the other person. The path from fraternity to altericity sees an intensification of Levinas's discourse on responsibility, on the difference between Being and the Other, and on the biblical theme of "giving to the Stranger. (Introduction, 14-5)

Alericity, or rather an unflinching love that makes mere spectator of violence into vocal witness, into kin, is what needed to be focused on to make sense of Nelson M-T's ambitions in *Against War*. An augmentation of Levinas's radical love for the Other, Nelson M-T's conception of altericity goes beyond the catalyst point of a face to face encounter with the Other, and instead takes up an intrinsic concern for the Other and their death even when they are not physically present. This investigation of the intrinsic concern for the Other's death in altericity oscillates between unpacking the abstract and the socio-historical contexts in which the Other finds themselves dominated under the weight of modernity. Nelson M-T's altericity goes further than Levinas's understanding of fraternity and the ethical responsibility to care for the Other, because it does not demand that we "know" the Other; instead we can understand the large scale systems of violence that afflict the Other and in recognising all potentialities of suffering, pain, and barbarity that could befall the Other, we come to occupy a shared space, a shared being, with which we seek to love the Other and change their material conditions despite our distance from them.

To appropriately process the sheer scale of the violence, is in turn to understand how the world arrived at this current condition and hold space for the hope of liberatory possibility. The project in *Against War* is built on a foundation of love and solidarity that cuts through the bitter but necessary discussion of what brought us to our current state of affairs.

In my reappraisal of the text and Nelson M-T's project, I recognized, in the paradigm of war, a means of naming those who engage in altericity in a bid for liberation and those who look on and allow war to unfold: the *witness* and the *spectator*. Witnesses are those who become kin and fight against the paradigm of

war through love. Spectators are those who enable the death ethic of colonialism by disengaging with those othered and allowing their maltreatment. To arrive at alterity in Nelson M-T's text, to arrive at speaking out as loving witness, there must be an understanding of the death ethic that comes with war and the enforcement of depersonalising othering through the silence of the spectator.

Using the characters of the witness and the spectator as a lens by which to understand the alterity posited by Nelson M-T shifted my reading of the text. The "nowness" of the violence that permeated my initial critique of the paradigm of war, became instead a recognition of the moment we live in and the relevancy of Nelson M-T's project. This is a moment where the roles of spectator and witness have become hypercritical in delineating who is or is not contributing to the liberation of those enduring violent dispossession and erasure. Now, in the age of screens and Twitter feeds, there is a reckoning that must be made with how the colonial death ethic that Nelson M-T articulates has mutated to suit our contemporary conditions. Our processes of othering may remain much the same, but the mediums available to engage in such practices have shifted. But, as we must keep in sight of the central project of *Against War*, even if there is a need to understand the violence of othering, we must never lose sight of the potential for decolonial love.

SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE, MUNDANE ATROCITY, ROUTINE BRUTALITY

The Spectator's Role in Upholding the Colonial Death Ethic Central to War through the Borders erected between Other and Self

The colonial death-world becomes the ethical limit of human reality. It is a context in which violence and war are no longer extraordinary but become instead ordinary features of human existence. This perverse expression of the conversion of the extraordinary into the ordinary represents a "limit" situation, or perhaps even a post-limit situation in the sense that the excess of abnormality goes beyond its climax and begets another reality in which it comes to define the normal. (Chapter 3, 100)

The above excerpt is what I believe Nelson M-T was trying to get me to interrogate more critically in our conversation. The “nowness”, the “newness” of the extraordinary violence I was fixated on was in fact the normal modus operandi for human behaviour under colonialism. Mass death has become routine; it is necessarily a part of the fabric of “modern” civilisations. But why did I feel in my seeing of it a newness? What was I recognising in the world that speaks to an undercurrent in the project of Nelson M-T’s book? It was how, in the social media age, those “spectating” violences hold a distinctive position in the death ethic for which their silence amplifies and further enables the systemic harms being done.

The death ethic behind the paradigm of war is an essential facet to in-group-out-group formation and a justification for eradication of the so-called “uncivilized” peoples seen to be incapable of properly engaging in western practices of modernity. So much of *Against War* fervently pursues how the Self-Other distinction enforces a normalisation of the institutionalisation of overwhelming violence. Nelson M-T’s meticulous working through theories of othering, from Heidegger, to Hegel, to Fanon, is one of the most robust analytic pillars of his book.

However, where this othering manifests in the role of the spectator is something I myself will tease from the text of *Against War*.

Spectators are those who silently consume the violence being done to colonised and marginalised, and thus play into the game of recognition in the death ethic while simultaneously denying that such a game is even taking place. To the spectator, the structural reality of war is absolutely non extraordinary. The spectator’s silence and their avoidance of acknowledging the violent reality, as evident in their refusing to join in protest with the marginalised, speaks to how critical they are in maintaining the inner workings of colonial death ethic.

Locating the centrality of violence and othering to the maintenance of colonial realities, one must carefully engage Nelson M-T’s first chapter of *Against War*, “From Liberalism to Hitlerism, Tracing the Origins of Violence and War.” It is

in this chapter that the silent spectator can be teased out as contributing to the colonial death ethic of war through practicing othering. Like Aime Cesaire² before him illuminated in his vital text *Discourse on Colonialism*, Nelson M-T takes up the mantle in explaining how western calls for universalizing liberal humanisms and abstract conceptions of freedom inevitably birth violence. In his discussion of Hitlerism, Nelson M-T moves fluidly between Heidegger, Levinas, Nietzsche, and Husserl to paint a trajectory for how a stagnating western picture of a universalising “self” paves the way for developing the forever foreigner: the Other in need of removal. But in a discussion of Hitlerism, it seems impossible to make sense of the historical precedent of the Nazis without apprehending what it takes for there to be a “buy in” to large scale atrocities that involve both ideological and material commitments. You need the spectator, the bystander, to not say or see anything, to pursue only the “truth” of the new reality of normalised brutality (Chapter 1, 24).

It is here, where I have drawn out the spectator, that I see a resurgent need to understand the continual “nowness” of Nelson M-T’s work. The silent spectator in the contemporary is one who has access to all the resources to see the Other otherwise, and still refuses. In pursuit of necrotic peace, where there remain the hushed screams of the othered, the spectator of today looks at their Instagram, their TikTok, their Twitter, and filters out all that does not resemble themselves. The silence is deafening, the gaps in knowledge and knowing the world almost untraversable. The spectator of today takes themselves to be free in the western abstract sense. They believe they freely choose their non-engagement with the othered in their curated slurred feeds of monotonous “apolitical” content. The spectator takes news, any news, as entertainment divorced from reality. This supposed freedom holds in it a latent fear of finding themselves othered. This is a so-called freedom where there lies no potential for liberation, because there is no desire to see oneself in the Other, the marginalised.

An example of the logic of such spectatorship can be found in the Western academics’ bureaucratic responses to the violence of settler colonial genocide

unfolding in occupied Palestine and the pro-Palestinian liberation movements taking place across the world. At various institutions, Cornell, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, etc., the dominant sentiment among those in the bureaucratic rungs of power is to stay silent on Palestine and vocally endorse the settler state of Israel, for fear of losing donor support and appearing “too extreme.” To this end, the silence propagated at many of these academic institutions relies on a glib spectatorship that plays into dominant narratives that erase Palestinian aliveness and legitimacy. These academies co-sign the ruling death ethic that relegates Palestinian people and their resistance to the margins. To speak on Palestine in the western academy is to risk becoming a danger to the status quo, and so any dean, chair, provost who wishes to maintain their career rather than be unceremoniously dismissed stays stumm.

But we must not remain mere silent spectators.

To move into becoming vocal witnesses is to move into bringing liberation about by a reverberance of the death and dying of the marginalized in one’s own flesh. The witness remembers and (re)members the bodies and memories of the marginalized. With this we arrive back to the need for altericity.

Nelson M-T writes:

Desire is the upsurge of the loving subjectivity. It is a Yes, or a radical affirmation of sociality and interhuman contact. *Altericity is the Yes of love expressed as non-indifference toward the Other, primarily toward the Other who is “below” (also sub-Other or sub-alter).* The Yes of love thus leads to a conception of ethical struggle against the dehumanization of the sub-alter. In this sense, *altericity is another way of conceiving the de-colonial attitude, out of which the de-colonial reduction emerges and is sustained.* As simultaneously affirmative of generosity and critical of damnation, altericity and the de-colonial attitude are both affirmative and negative:” (Chapter 4, 158)

To speak now of the witness, is to speak of a person engaging in altericity. The

spectator enables death and mass violence, while the witness sees those relegated to Other status and instead chooses to say “yes” to their very being. The witness in their love, in their willingness to bring those “below” out of subaltern status, participate in the praxis of a liberatory de-colonial ethic. In understanding “witnessing” death vs merely “spectating” it, we must be attentive to how the former entails a decolonial attempt to make human and heard the Other, where the latter entails a viewership that does nothing to challenge the dominant order of modernity.

ON THE BECOMING OF THE “WITNESS” TO WAR, TRANSFORMING INTO LOVING RADICALISED KIN

*Liberation through Altericity and the Refusal of the Colonised to Die by Speaking Life
into One another*

Moving towards Home (excerpt)

BY JUNE JORDAN

“Where is Abu Fadi,” she wailed.

“Who will bring me my loved one?”

The New York Times, 9/20/1982

—

I need to talk about living room
where I can sit without grief without wailing aloud
for my loved ones
where I must not ask where is Abu Fadi
because he will be there beside me
I need to talk about living room
because I need to talk about home

I was born a Black woman

and now

I am become a Palestinian

against the relentless laughter of evil
there is less and less living room
and where are my loved ones?

It is time to make our way home.

In this now viral fragment of a June Jordan poem, there exists the following question: what is it when a witness to war takes up the death of the Other, wades through it, understands it in their own body, and from this understanding seeks to take liberatory action?

The spectator does not grieve. The witness not only grieves but holds a strong affective tie to the Other. The spectator does not see themselves as occupying the same space as the Other.³ The witness sees themselves as occupying the same space, the same home, the same body as the Other for whom they feel kinship. Jordan's becoming, is a coming into the liberatory decolonial ethic that Nelson M-T exalts in *Against War*. In the poem Jordan shows us altericity in its purest form. This is again why Nelson M-T's conception of altericity is distinct from Levinas's ideas around fraternity, as the kind of love entailed in altericity insists on a sort of "becoming" the Other despite physical and epistemic distance.

Maldonado Torres offers the following useful passage to make sense of the kind of love, the altericity, present in Jordan's poem:

Love is just another name here for the paradox of the gift and for what I have called before altericity. *Altericity advances a distinct conception of peace, of interhuman contact, and of the very meaning of the human.* The gift of the self represents, beyond the solipsistic achievement of truth and knowledge, the point of entry of the existent into the human. *The self is only able to see (theoros) and grasp (comprehend), because it first hears and gives. Hearing the "cry" of the wounded and the afflicted becomes, in this sense, the enlightening*

act par excellence. At this point the neutralizing and impersonal trend of the process of signification is reoriented by its reference to the *interhuman realm, and more particularly, to the one-for-the-Other.* The suspension of the priority of the universal by (de-colonial) love represents in this way the effective exorcism from the hypnotic glare of Being. (Conclusion, 241)

June sees and comprehends herself in the struggle of the Palestinian people for freedom. Hearing the cry of the besieged people of Palestine she produced her own cry, an acknowledgement of their shared humanity, of being “one-for the Other.” Here, peace comes only with interrelation and connectivity, with witnessing as actively invested in the Other’s existence rather than a disinterested spectating role. Altericity, and witnessing, is a matter of connection, emotional resonance, and recognition.

Indeed, a non-reductionary recognition of the Other is requisite to being able to see and comprehend them. In Chapter 4, “Recognition from Below the Meaning of the Cry and the Gift of the Self in the Struggle for Recognition,” Nelson M-T works through Fanon to construct a picture of recognition that extends beyond the trap of the traditional Hegelian master/slave dialectic. It is the “phenomenology of the cry” that we come to understand the paradox of altericity and the pursuit of liberation despite all available evidence pointing to such a pursuit’s futility. The cry is one uttered in a bid for attention, for action, when injustice is endured and not spoken of. It is here that we come to see that there is a refusal to die. And more still, it is a refusal to die in silence. Even with the realities of the colonial death ethic imposing limitations on the imaginaries of the colonised, the colonised still cry out. This cry is a denial of the supposed futility of resistance.

The cry, as outside of the subjectivities of spoken language, brings with it the potential for recognition where the witness need only be open to feel deeply. The cry of the othered and the altericity of the witness manifest together to produce a brave act of speech, where both parties connect with one another through themselves to affirm each other’s humanity and demands for existence. In the cry,

and in the altercity of the witness, we arrive at what Jordan's becoming means to understanding Nelson M-T's conception of liberation.

In the cry and the witnesses becoming of the Other, there lies an affirmation and an acknowledgement of wrongdoing that demands the witness be moved to speak, to act, in a way that ensures that all selves are recognised, and all worlds included. This is what constitutes the witness's role in liberation

On such liberation Nelson M-T provides this clarification and definition:

Dussel holds on to the idea of rationality, while he also criticizes an abstract and univocal concept of universality. It is here that *the difference between emancipation and liberation is relevant*. What emancipation is to modernity and universality, liberation is to transmodernity and the call for a diverse world. For while *European emancipation refers to a singular process of coming to maturity, liberation refers to the many attempts, especially by formerly colonized subjects, to affirm their own selves and to create a world in which many worlds can fit*. Liberation claims liberty, equality, and fraternity, but also *solidarity and the embrace of alterity, including epistemic diversity*. (Chapter 6, 230)

Liberation mandates that the witness embrace the selves of many.

The witness, then must embrace the memory, body, and knowledges of those fighting the colonial death ethic and their attempted effacement. To engage in liberation, for Nelson M-T, is to open oneself to the many possibilities and many struggles of the world. There is then the openness to working outside of dominant structures to attempt to attain freedom, and it is this attempted externality from the logics of modernity and coloniality that sets liberation apart from emancipation done only on and in the terms of those in power.

But what is it for the witness to actually engage this liberatory de-colonial ethic?

The "speech" of the witness alone is not what matters. Their looking towards

and recognising in the cry of the othered a person is not the only thing altericity would demand if it truly brings us into a space of liberty revelation.⁴ It is action that is demanded of the witness. Refusal to let die the Other is an act. And such an act goes beyond nebulous illusions to radical speech and recognition. This act entails the witness putting themselves against the otherising gaze of erasive ideologies and systems of extermination and saying that there will be no more forgetting. This action takes place in many forms of practice, as is expected of love. The witness can protest in the streets, can speak out in public forums such as classrooms and workplaces, can boycott.

Even if all these methods prove unsuccessful, and perhaps unsatisfying, the witness must still never let the true reality of the barbarity the Other undergoes in the global systems of violence and dispossession be forgotten. Altericity, after all, is the many ways that one can make kin relations in confronting the death, be it social or physiological, of the Other. To build kinship relations takes an enormous amount of work and imagination.

To engage in Nelson M-T's liberatory de-colonial ethic is to engage in love. To love in altericity is to give oneself willingly to the constant act of germinating relationships. The project in *Against War*, while a meticulous analysis of literature and circumstance, holds at its core a demand from a bleeding, beating heart; that those who witness this world of death be moved by it to act.

The witness looks upon Other, murdered and ensnared by coloniality's impositions of death, and is roused by audacious love.

The witness refuses to let the Other die.

The witness sees in the death of the Other their own death. The witness screams, the Other cries, and through this howling in spite of threats of annihilation, a sort of speech is born from pure emotionality, rendered from souls unwilling to be extinguished.

Against War gives the reader the gift of reflecting on their spectatorship, and insisting that they take up a witnessing, an altercity, that will help build our decolonial tomorrow.

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NOTES

1. I would be committing a grave injustice if I did not mention and thank Dr. Jennifer Ponce de Leon for our conversation around the animosities present in many decolonial texts around Marxist ideologies and frameworks.
2. Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
3. While it may appear that the distinction drawn between the Witness and the Spectator may give rise to another situation in which one party is rendered Other (namely the Spectator), I would challenge such a critique by returning to what the act of othering implies. Otherisation to some extent is done with the impulse to name one of the categories identified as inferior, irrational, non-agent; in the case of the spectator I do not take them to be such an Other who is unable to act and in speak in the world. Indeed, it is their active choice to turn away from the marginalised given their rational risk/benefit assessment of their own position in society. So it is that in identifying the silence of the Spectator I am not seeking to make them other, but instead point out the Spectator's silence to exalt the action, the speech in spite of dangerous circumstances, of the Witness.
4. "The 'serenity' of organized discourse is not preceded by a period of contemplation or neutral observation of reality, but by a time of urgency in which the subject cannot take his recognition as a human being for granted and has to attract attention simply to the fact that he is there. The cry is, indeed, precisely that, a sound uttered as a call for attention, as a demand for immediate action or remedy, or as an expression of pain that points to an injustice committed or to something that is lacking. The cry is the revelation of someone who has been forgotten or wronged. Before the word reaches the horizons of meaning, where the world is unveiled and the meaning of reality becomes clear, the cry becomes a call for the recognition of the singularity of the subject as such. The cry indicates the "return of a living subject" who impertinently announces his presence and who by doing so unsettles the established formations of meaning and challenges dominant ideological expressions" (Chapter 4, 133).

the transparency of war photography

michel-antoine xhignesse

INTRODUCTION

Among the public, it is widely believed that photographs are an especially objective means of representation; the camera doesn't lie, after all, and we rely heavily on photographic evidence to inform our understanding of events around the world. In photojournalism, this is enshrined in the ideal of objectivity, which champions fidelity of representation and prescribes minimal intervention on the photographer's part when it comes to setting the shot or processing the image. The ideal of objectivity is especially important for war photography, which as a journalistic practice, strives to distinguish itself from the state propaganda

efforts that accompany any war. War photography relies on the ideal of objectivity to communicate the surreal horror of distant goings-on to audiences who are emotionally and geographically far removed from the everyday realities of war. Any reason to doubt a war photograph's objectivity is a reason to doubt its veracity and is, concomitantly, liable to weaken a viewer's motivation to work to end the conflict.

Among philosophers, Kendall Walton (1984) has tried to explain the popular intuition of photography's objectivity by arguing that photography is a "transparent" medium: by seeing *through* a photograph we literally perceive the world itself, just as we do through the lenses of a pair of glasses or through an optical telescope. In other words, photographs put us into perceptual contact with the world. Consider a photograph so famous we all know it: Nick Ut's *The Terror of War* (1972), the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a Vietnamese child running naked in the street after being burned by napalm (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Nick Ut, *The Terror of War* (1972)

The idea is that when we look at this photograph, we really see *her* and her horrific pain and terror. A drawing, by contrast, would show us the scene *through the eyes*

of the artist. No matter how accurate the drawing was, it would always show us what the artist believed she saw. But the mechanical nature of photographic representation inoculates the resulting image from the photographer's beliefs about what he sees. In this case, Ut's beliefs about the war and the child's state of mind are entirely independent of the picture's content. By contrast, if he had produced a drawing – even one which looked identical to the photo – what was represented in that drawing would have been wholly dependent on what *he* saw, believed to be the case, and chose to render. But because he photographed her, his mental states play no role in communicating the scene; we see it as it was fifty-three years ago, not as he saw it. Transparency is an intuition about the photographic medium's mind-independence, not its pictorial realism. This is why we attach such an epistemic premium to photographs as sources of evidence, as opposed to drawings, and why journalism makes use of photography and video but relegates drawing to political caricatures. Beliefs are taken to be liable to introduce sources of error which purely mechanical reproductions cannot.

But the aims and practice of war photography, I think, are at odds with the ideal of objectivity and the resulting image's transparency. War photography is not merely illustrative or documentary; it aims to convey the horrors of war and spur action to end the conflict. And to do so, it must *represent* the conflict, using discrete moments of human suffering to stand in for an event whose duration and magnitude defy easy conceptualization, and whose salient properties are not merely or even primarily visual. In other words, war photography's *subject* (i.e. what it is about) is distinct from its *object* (i.e. what it depicts), and this mismatch disrupts the real similarity relations between the photograph and its subject. The naked girl running from a napalm cloud certainly *represents* the horrors of the Vietnam War, but she *looks* nothing like it. The resulting photograph *cannot* be transparent with respect to its subject, even if it transparently depicts the scene in front of Ut's lens.

TRANSPARENCY

Imagine looking at a child through a transparent surface such as a clear glass window. It seems straightforwardly true that you see *that child*; you have direct perceptual access to her despite the interposition of the glass. Now imagine a good, photo-realistic painting of that same child, exactly as she is. When you look at the painting, do you see the child? Again, the answer seems straightforward: no. What you see is a *painting of* the child, a representation of her, rather than the child herself. So far, so good. But now, what if you look at a photograph of her?

According to Kendall Walton, the answer should be “yes”: you *do* see the child, by literally seeing *through* the photograph to its subject.¹ On this view, photography is a *transparent* medium like air, glass, or water, although it has the added advantage of being able to show us things which are geographically or temporally distant from us. In this respect, the camera acts as an aid to sight, much as a telescope or a microscope might.² According to Walton, photographs can extend our sight in this way because, like other visual aids, they are (1) counterfactually dependent, (2) belief-independent, and (3) maintain real similarity relations between the world and what is depicted.³ Together, these qualities preserve the tight causal fit between the way the world is and how we see it.

Like ordinary, normally-functioning sight, photography is counterfactually dependent because a difference in the scene before the lens would result in a photograph that visually differs in the same way. Consider a snapshot of a man with a handlebar moustache; had he sported a pencil moustache, that is what the photograph would have shown instead. What is more, the photograph lets us literally see the handlebar moustache for ourselves because the resulting image is sufficiently similar to (or indiscernible from) the real thing: it is qualified to play the same kind of visual role that the moustache itself does for us in ordinary sight, or close enough as makes no meaningful difference (this is what Walton calls “real similarity”). A painted portrait might also render the

moustache sufficiently well for it to possess all of its epistemically relevant visual properties, that is, for it to look just like the real thing. And it might even qualify as counterfactually dependent, so long as the artist is sufficiently skilled and her representation sufficiently accurate. But, Walton argues, at the procedural level the painting's real similarity depends on the artist's ability to notice things about her subject, and her beliefs about what is before her, whereas a photograph does not. This is because the photograph, but not the painting, is belief-independent, just like the experience of seeing through a mirror or a telescope.⁴

A painting, then, is always only a representation of something.⁵ Although a painting may look every bit as realistic as a photograph, the artist can only ever paint those perceptual elements which she detects, whereas the camera gives us everything before its lens. As Walton puts it,

Putting things together, we get this: part of what it is to see something is to have visual experiences which are caused by it in a purely mechanical manner. Objects cause their photographs and the visual experiences of viewers mechanically; so we see the objects through the photographs. By contrast, objects cause paintings not mechanically but in a more "human" way, a way involving the artist; so we don't see through paintings.⁶

In other words, the difference between a photograph and a painting amounts to the way in which each conveys information. A photograph's reliance on mechanical processes preserves a closer link to the world and the way it is arrayed than painting and the manupgraphic arts do, passing as they do through an intermediary. For Walton, a manupgraphic representation of something makes it fictional that we see it, whereas a photograph allows us to literally see it for ourselves.⁷

Photography's epistemic privilege is thus frequently understood as a consequence of its automaticity, of its mechanical underpinnings.⁸ The photographer just points her tool in the right direction and shoots, and we then get to see whatever

was in front of her lens at that time. This is true even when a photograph has been faked, as with Eugene Shepard's infamous *Hodag* (1893), below (Fig. 2):



Figure 2: Eugene Shepard, *Hodag* (1893)

A hodag is a carnivorous creature spawned by cremated oxen – in other words, there is no such thing. But Shepard claimed to have captured a live one in 1893 and took a picture to prove it. He gathered together a posse of men armed with axes and pitchforks, had them surround a model, and snapped his picture. The resulting photograph is a perfectly accurate depiction of what was in front of the lens: sixteen men armed with axes and pitchforks, surrounding the model of a small, bullish creature. The thing is no hodag, of course, but the photograph itself never made any such claims. We may be wrong in our interpretation of the scene – if, e.g., we think it shows us a real hodag – but the fault there is our own rather than the photograph's, which simply showed us what it 'saw'.

Diarmuid Costello calls this the “orthodox” view of photography,⁹ and in philosophical circles, at least, it is in decline.¹⁰ Some have resisted photography's

transparency on the grounds that there are crucial elements of first-personal experience which photographs do not and cannot convey, such as the egocentric information which enables us to orient ourselves and the object of our sight relative to our surroundings.¹¹ Others see transparency as an oversimplification of the photographic process, which involves any number of discrete decisions and interventions on the photographer's part, and which bakes a number of assumptions into the construction of the photographic apparatus itself.¹² Still others have argued that these qualms are beside the point, and that an account of photographic transparency can accommodate them – so long as it concedes that transparency is not the sole purview of mechanical representations, but is rather a feature of any process of depiction, whether mechanical or manugraphic, which tracks features of the scene independently of belief.¹³

Regardless, what matters for our present purposes is just that photographs are transparent when they are (1) counterfactually dependent, (2) belief-independent, and (3) preserve real similarity relations between world and image.¹⁴ Together, these conditions allow us to sort the kinds of visual representations which put us into perceptual contact with the world from those that don't. Consider a work of manugraphic (hand-drawn) art, such as Goya's painted *Portrait of the Duke of Wellington* (1812-4). The painting satisfies the real similarity condition, since its subject (presumably) looks a fair bit like what we would have seen had we gazed upon the Iron Duke in real life. But it is unclear whether it satisfies counterfactual dependence because the answer to that question is utterly dependent on what Goya noticed about Wellington, and what he chose to paint. Goya's was presumably a fairly discriminating eye, so on a good day – and with a patron unashamed of showcasing their blemishes and other imperfections – we can imagine that his works were suitably counterfactually dependent. They are not transparent for all that, however, because they are not belief-independent; so much hinges on what Goya thought he saw and chose to paint.¹⁵ Of course, not every photograph will satisfy these conditions, either. A very blurry artistic photograph such as my father might take (using his patented "Hendel Swirl")

would satisfy counterfactual dependence and belief-independence, but would founder on real similarity since although it would accurately record the light at the moment the shutter was depressed, the result would not closely resemble what the eye described.

WAR PHOTOGRAPHY

Now that we have a better handle on transparency, we should ask: what is war photography?

At a first pass, it is simply the practice of photographing armed conflict and its human consequences. But that won't quite do, since the practice of war photography is one which we usually distinguish from propaganda, especially state-sponsored efforts to advertise some war effort. Instead, today we typically think of war photography as a documentary effort, as a practice with primarily epistemic aims. As a result, it is strongly associated with journalism.

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when the practice of war photography began. Some Daguerrotypes exist from the Mexican-American War (1846-8) and the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-9), although these are limited in their coverage by the nature of the medium, which still required long exposure times. A surer start date comes from the Crimean War (1853-6),¹⁶ when Roger Fenton was engaged to document the war in some 350 images. Again, however, technological limitations required long exposure times, so Fenton's work was limited to posed figures and static subjects. These photographs were explicitly intended to drum up the British public's support for the war, and so show only its best-manicured face, complete with dress uniforms and soldiers having a grand time of things. Consider, for instance, Fenton's *Lt. Col. Hallowell, His Days Work Over* (1855) (Fig. 3), which shows us an improbably clean Hallowell reclining on the ground while his manservant pours out a libation.



Figure 3: Roger Fenton, *Lt. Col. Hallewell, His Days Work Over* (1855). Image Courtesy of Getty Open Content.

The physical limitations of the medium – especially the bulk and fragility of the equipment and the long exposure times required – meant that for much of the nineteenth century, the emphasis in war photography was on evoking a suitable atmosphere, rather than the journalistic ideal of strict documentation. Fenton, for example, was famous for a picture entitled *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855) (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Roger Fenton, *Valley of the Shadow of Death* (1855)

The name was a deliberate reference to a memorable line from Tennyson's poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1854), although the photograph actually features the landscape a few miles southeast of the doomed cavalry charge. Because they were primarily concerned to convey the feel of war, and because their medium demanded relatively long exposure times, nineteenth-century war photographers were not above staging the scene, such as by rearranging a corpse here or there. Fenton's *Valley* is another case in point, since it features a road peppered with cannonballs which were rolled into place for dramatic effect.¹⁷

The first photographs of actual combat were taken a day apart in 1863, during the American Civil War: Philip Haas and Washington Peale caught the *USS New Ironsides* in a naval engagement (September 7), while George S. Cook caught Union ships bombarding fortifications outside Charleston (September 8). These photographs are notable also for the simple fact that they are not staged, despite the ubiquity of the practice in order to overcome the physical limitations of the medium. Since photographs of live combat were exceedingly difficult to take, given the equipment and exposure times required, photographic attention

focused instead on the aftermath of combat. Here, too, it was commonplace for photographers to rearrange corpses and other detritus into more evocative arrangements, as Matthew Sim and Alexander Gardner frequently did in their photographs of the Civil War, and as James Robertson and Felice Beato did during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

By the First World War, photographic technology had become much more portable, and so we find much more documentation of this war than of previous conflicts. But cameras at this time still used panoramic viewfinders and glass plates, which significantly constrained which kinds of images could be taken and relayed home. It was not until the 1930s that photography established itself as the primary mode of illustration in the printed press, aided in no small part by the development of wirephoto transmission in 1921 and the portable 35mm Leica in 1925.¹⁸ It was no coincidence, then, that war photography only really came into its own with the Spanish Civil War (1936-9),¹⁹ which was extensively photographed by amateur and semi-professional photographers for a mass audience, and which has been described as the “most photogenic war anyone has ever seen.”²⁰

War photography's fortunes are intimately tied to those of photojournalism more broadly, of which it forms one significant branch. Photojournalism increasingly distinguished itself from art photography in the 1920s and 1930s, when its practitioners pushed for its recognition as more than a merely illustrative medium. This led to a push for increased professionalism, which saw a landmark victory in 1942 when photojournalism was included as part of the journalism curriculum at the University of Missouri, and again in 1946 with the establishment of the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) and the publication of its attendant code of ethics.²¹ This interwar period of increased professionalism saw press photographers increasingly working to distinguish themselves from the tradition of art photography²² and from the propagandistic use of the press in the First World War.²³ Photojournalists subsequently played a key role in reporting the Second World War, when they were tasked with

communicating the realities of war in ways that print journalism simply could not capture.²⁴ Some professional photographers were attached to military divisions, but this war also saw a great deal of work by untrained amateur photographers who brought their own equipment to Europe's battlefields and showed them in all their horror.²⁵

Photojournalism and war photography have since become regular staples of our daily news diet. Over the ensuing decades, photojournalism established itself as a means of reporting on news and events, and photojournalists developed their own codes of ethics, premised on the notion that they were *journalists* despite their non-verbal storytelling medium. Early versions of these codes allowed for some measure of manipulation of the image (especially via dodging, burning, and cropping) to enhance viewers' ability to glean relevant information. But as the ease and sophistication of photographic manipulation increased over the decades, these codes came to reflect a stricter set of prohibitions. The Associated Press' code of ethics, for example, forbids most alterations, including staging scenes and posing subjects, though it permits some "minor" alterations such as burning, cropping, dodging, toning, and grayscale conversion.²⁶ The NPPA likewise proscribes staging photos or interfering with events to produce a better photograph, and aims for the accurate and comprehensive representation of its subjects.²⁷ As a result, the war photography published in media outlets today is subject to strict conventions mandating accuracy of representation and forbidding staging and post-processing manipulation. In other words, war photography today is governed by epistemic norms that aim for the accurate transmission of information by allowing us to see through the photographic surface to the events which generated it.

IS WAR PHOTOGRAPHY TRANSPARENT?

We commonly think of photography as a paradigmatically epistemic practice: after all, when we find ourselves in need of evidence to analyse, photography (of either the still or moving varieties) is our first resort.²⁸ Photojournalism

is one such context, since news photos represent themselves as “literal visual transcriptions of the real world,”²⁹ as a record of the facts and proof that some event really took place. In other words, photojournalism is built around belief-independent counterfactual dependence: had events been otherwise, so too would the attending photograph have been. The epistemic role of photography in photojournalistic practice is corroborated by photojournalistic codes of ethics which, as we saw in §3, prize the medium’s objectivity above all else. But even if modern photojournalism is primarily an epistemic practice, this does not mean that it is or was exclusively so; other social practices are available, after all, and photojournalism may well participate in these to some extent. The question before us is whether war photography, in particular, is exclusively or even primarily an epistemic practice. On the one hand, the idea is certainly plausible, given the prominent place war photography occupies in the clearly epistemic practice of photojournalism. But on the other hand, war photography seems to have different aims from other kinds of photojournalism. Indeed, many of our most common photographic practices are not obviously epistemically-oriented; selfies, for instance, are taken to enhance one’s social capital, while a parent takes snapshots of milestone events in their child’s life not just to document them, but to help them to construct the narrative of their own parenthood for themselves.³⁰

We can see, from the preceding potted history, that early war photography was not exactly an objective endeavour: the technological limitations of the time meant that it involved significant staging, and the imperial culture’s jingoism saw itself reflected in what were largely propagandistic, rather than documentary, efforts. This suggests that, before it was assimilated into journalistic practice, war photography belonged to a different social practice: that of state propaganda, or something to that effect. Although the resulting images certainly played a role in our epistemic practices, that role was dwarfed by their propagandistic aims. They might, strictly speaking, satisfy the counterfactual, belief-independent, and real similarity conditions for transparency, but these images are much closer in

spirit to Shepard's *Hodag* than to the snapshot of a relative. We see through them to what was really in front of the lens, but what was in front of the lens is not quite what we are led to believe was there: what the photograph shows (its object) comes apart from what it is *about* (its subject).³¹ *Hodag*'s subject is the capture of a fearsome (fictional) beast, but its object is a group of men standing around a rather unconvincing model. But Shepard's photo is misleading because it is a fake; its status as a hoax establishes a clean and clear distinction between its real and its representational content, which is fictional. Much the same is true of early war photography, given how much manipulation was involved and the propagandistic uses to which it was put. More interesting for our purposes is the journalistic practice of war photography, since adherence to the ideal of objectivity means that these photographs feature real and non-manipulated scenes. Do such photographs suggest a similar differentiation of object and subject?

It is tempting to think not, since journalism is a primarily epistemic practice, and photojournalism is a species of journalism. But my contention is that war photography, although it is a kind of photojournalism, has primarily non-epistemic aims, which opens up space for the differentiation of its object and subject.³² Let me be clear: there is no doubt that war photography is offered as evidence of horrific events in distant parts. My point is that it is not offered *simply* or *primarily* as that evidence; it is presented to us in an effort to convince us of some position (viz., that war is morally repugnant) and to spur us into action (viz., by opposing the war in question). In other words, war photography's primary aims are *perlocutionary*. In this respect, war photography mirrors propaganda, whose aims are likewise perlocutionary. But where propaganda aims to persuade us *without* regard for the truth, war photography aims to persuade us *with* the truth. In other words, propagandistic practices imperil the image's counterfactual dependence by laundering it through the bad faith of state actors, whereas war photography is predicated on preserving the image's belief-independence and counterfactual dependence. Propaganda is, by

its nature, deceptive; war photography distinguishes itself from propaganda in that it is parasitic on standard photographic practice and the trust we have invested in it.³³ Propaganda is part and parcel of social practices whose goals are to increase public support for, and contributions to, state governments and their actions; war photography, on the other hand, is part and parcel of social practices centred on activism and dissent.

Now, if war photography's goals really are perlocutionary, then these goals are rarely articulated in photojournalistic codes of ethics. What is more, few such codes offer any guidance at all concerning the gruesome or violent imagery which forms war photography's bread and butter; they are overwhelmingly concerned with photography's documentary aspect. One significant exception, however, comes from Spain's National Association of Graphic Press and Television Reporters (ANAIGP-TV), which counsels that photographs of pain and suffering are only acceptable when their goal is to "raise the public's awareness and safeguard human life."³⁴ This at least lends credence to my characterization of the aims of war photography as being primarily perlocutionary.

If I am right that war photography is not a predominantly epistemic practice, then where does this leave us with respect to its transparency? As far as the image's ability to track properties of the scene in front of it independently of belief is concerned, nothing has changed: the practice of war photography is both belief-independent and counterfactually dependent on its object. But the shift from an epistemic to a perlocutionary practice opens the possibility for a gap between the photograph's object and its subject. And when such a gap opens, it endangers the image's real similarity.

War photographs all have a *subject*, and this subject is not given to us by the purely physical processes which record light waves.³⁵ They are *about* some conflict, rather than any one person or object depicted – the photographer uses the image's photographic object (the bodies and events depicted on the image's surface) to communicate something which that object does not show us. Those people and

objects *represent* the war and its horror which, as an abstract and temporally-extended event, cannot be depicted in ways which will preserve real similarity relations. *War* is a concept, after all, an abstractum; it is not the kind of thing which can be captured in a concrete, physical medium, nor is it a predominantly *visual* event. Consider a different example: how would you photograph *love*? You might snap a couple in a tender moment, or parents holding a child's hand. At best, however, the resulting image would only show a single instance of love, rather than love itself. This is not a problem for most of our photographic practices because, for the most part, the pictures we take are *about* the objects in front of the camera: the photograph's object and subject are one and the same. In some photographic practices, however, the two come apart; this is typically the case in art photography, for example, and it is the case in war photography, too. A war photograph is not *about* the objects in front of the camera. They stand in for something else, for a war, war in general, or, more properly, a particular perspective on war or a war. No photograph or series of photographs can ever communicate all of war's aesthetically, epistemically, or morally relevant properties; at best, it is like using a two-dimensional surface to communicate an object's three-dimensional properties. When it comes to a concept such as *war*, photographs simply cannot play the same kind of experiential role as perception of the real thing does.³⁶ What they *can* do is approximate it, either in terms of bare documentary evidence (though this seems like a hopeless task) or, more commonly (and successfully), by virtue of *representing* it. The result is that war photographs are not transparent all the way down: they are transparent with respect to their object, but not their subject.

Consider Nick Ut's *The Terror of War*. To be sure, the photograph preserves real similarity relations between the soldiers, children, etc. in the photograph and at that moment in real life, but these are not its subject. The subject of the photograph is the Vietnam War, its horror and injustice, and a picture of a child being burned alive is simply not 'really similar' to that. How could it be? It is only one minuscule part of the whole horror that was that – or any – war. What this

part *can* do effectively, however, is *represent* that subject. It is *about* something – the criminal injustice of the Vietnam War – and that aboutness is embodied in the photograph's focal subject,³⁷ Phan Thi Kim Phuc (the little girl). But its focal subject could just as easily have been one of the other children running alongside her, the soldiers trailing them, or even the ominous clouds roiling towards them. Any number of photographic objects could have satisfied Ut's representational goals, insofar as they are all equally dissimilar to his subject, the inhumanity of the Vietnam War. This fact invites viewers to take an interrogative interest in the image and Ut's choice of photographic objects, and to reflect on what it is intended to communicate. Indeed, the very fact that it *has* a clear subject – that it is about a conflict which cares nothing for the horror of burning children alive rather than, say, the glory of crushing your enemies, seeing them driven before you, and hearing the lamentations of their children (a possible but obviously incorrect interpretation of the scene) – suggests the guiding hand of particular beliefs about the war. These beliefs anchor the relata of that similarity relation, determining what is similar to what; and one of those relata is the nature and horror of war, rather than the individuals depicted.

But consider also that we always approach these photographs with the knowledge that they are of some conflict – knowledge imparted, at minimum, by a caption or title, or, more usually, by an accompanying article. The photographs do not stand alone; they come to us already inscribed with meaning by their context. That is why, for example, we know that Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph shows us a child screaming *as she is burned alive by American napalm in the Vietnam War*, and not just a naked girl crying and running on the road as soldiers walk behind her. The photograph's visceral power is significantly enhanced by this added knowledge, which it simply does not convey on its own. It is, moreover, part of a *genre* of photography, a well-defined and even partially institutionalized set of social conventions and practices which give it meaning and shape the audience's engagement with it.³⁸

Knowing that it is a work of war photography, and having some sense of

what war photography is all about, we approach it differently than we might have approached it in an art exhibition, a parent's stack of old snapshots, or as a recruitment poster. It may seem hard to believe that our reactions to this photograph could be substantially different were it presented to us in a different institutional context, informed by a different set of background beliefs, conventions, and expectations. It is a powerful photograph, after all, and who could possibly think anything but that it is horrifically evil to set children on fire? But consider the following anecdote from Noam Chomsky:

Well, let me recount one of the most horrible experiences of my life, in the early '50s, maybe around 1951-52, with my first wife who died years ago. My wife and I were graduate students. One evening, we decided to go to a film. So we looked through the movie ads, and surprisingly, we saw a film called Hiroshima. That was surprising. We lived in Boston, and the film was in an area called Scollay Square. It was the porn district. We never went there. But we figured we'd go see this film. It was being shown as a pornographic film. The audience was laughing hysterically. It was a graphic film. I don't know where they got the live film. But it was a live film from Hiroshima: people running around with their skin peeling off—hideous scenes—and it was being shown as a pornographic film, while people were laughing.³⁹

The Terror of War works for us as it does in part because it has the title it has, and in part because it is presented to us in the context of a political conversation about the immorality of the Vietnam War. In a context in which no such dissent found public purchase, it might well have elicited a very different and disturbing reaction.

War photographers themselves are quite candid about their aims. The award-winning photojournalist James Nachtwey, for example, has said that “I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated,”⁴⁰ while Reporters Without Borders advocates that “without independent reporters war would just be a nice

show.”⁴¹ While both clearly evince a commitment to accurately portraying the events before the viewfinder – and thus eschewing staging and post-processing manipulation – they are also clearly committed to the goal of persuading us of a particular perspective on the events they capture, namely, that they are abhorrent and must be stopped. Similarly, Ashley Norman advises us to:

Think of a war photographer’s camera as the visual voice of those who have lost everything in war and cannot open the eyes of those fortunate enough to be safe at home with their families. It is not the mission of a war photojournalist to exploit human tragedy; it is their hope to expose its horrors.⁴²

Finally, here is Nick Ut, reflecting on his photograph and its legacy in the *Washington Post*: “If a single photo can make a difference, maybe even help end a war, then the work that we do is as vital now as it has ever been.”⁴³ All of this suggests that the practice of war photography is not a predominantly epistemic practice; rather, its epistemic dimension is subservient to a particular set of perlocutionary aims. War photography, then, is rather more like art photography than standard photography.

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave contemporary photojournalism and war photography? Ironically, it thrusts us squarely back into the nineteenth century, where transparency is concerned. In the nineteenth century, bulky and fragile equipment, long exposure times, and jingoistic national sentiment incentivized posed and staged photographs, making it incredibly difficult to document the actual goings-on in a conflict. As a result, the war photography of the day organized itself around a different set of aims. In the twenty-first century, the technological limitations have disappeared, but rather than being wholly subsumed under the aegis of photojournalism, the practice of war photography remains organized around a different set of aims, themselves developed in

contradistinction to the nineteenth century's propagandistic lens.

When speaking of photography in general, and war photography in particular, it is easy to lose oneself in the medium's mechanical nature. I have argued that determining whether the practice of war photography is transparent requires us to consider more than just its mechanical operations; we must consider the practice itself, its aims and methods, as well as how audiences engage with its products. Unlike a standard photograph, a war photograph is not *about* what it depicts in any meaningful way; the photographic object is just an artistic vehicle for expressing a deeper meaning. It stands in for a magnitude of misery which is simply too vast to communicate or encapsulate in discrete moments. Instead, war photography makes those moments stand in for the horrible whole of which they form just the tiniest, most insignificant parts.

Michel Foucault reintroduced the Greek term “parrhesia,” or “frank speech,” in order to characterise a class of person who speaks truth to power.⁴⁴ The *parrhesiastes* “opens [their] heart and mind to other people”⁴⁵ and directly shows them what she means, despite the social or physical danger of doing so.⁴⁶ Foucault's *parrhesiastes* is compelled to speak out not because her hand is forced, but rather because she feels duty-bound to make the truth known, however unpopular it may be.⁴⁷ We can see, from the preceding discussion, that this describes war photographers and their motivations to a tee; war photographers are not just complex shutter-clicking devices or paparazzies of human misery. They risk life, limb, and reputation to show us the consequences of what are often otherwise popular foreign policy interventions in distant lands, to show us the real face of war. But to do so effectively requires more than just a visual catalogue of the facts, since these do not speak to the lived reality of war, and do not really enable us to see it for ourselves. Instead, the war photographer must use these facts to find and amplify her voice, and to represent the carnage and misery to which she stands witness. The fog of war clouds even the most transparent surfaces; to cut through it requires an entirely different strategy, one predicated on indirect representation rather than straightforward depiction.

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NOTES

1. Kendall L. Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism." *Critical Inquiry* 11:2 (1984, 246-77).
2. Although it is worth noting that this is perhaps only true of optical telescopes and microscopes; see Hacking, Ian (2017), "Do We See Through a Microscope?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 62:4 (2017, 305-322).
3. Walton, "Transparent Pictures," 263-4, 271-2.
4. Not all proponents of transparency accept this distinction between manugraphic and mechanical representation. Dominic McIver Lopes, for example, argues that non-photographic pictures are perfectly capable of drawing on belief-independent recognitional abilities. See Dominic McIver Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, 180-2, 186.
5. Although early criticism of transparency took transparency and representation to be incompatible, subsequent work has shown convincingly that this need not be the case—see, e.g., Dominic McIver Lopes, "The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency." *Mind* 112 (2003, 335-48); Diarmuid Costello and Dawn M. Phillips, "Automatism, causality and realism: Foundational problems in the philosophy of photography." *Philosophy Compass* 4:1 (2009, 1-21); David Davies, "Scruton on the Inscrutability of Photographs." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49:4 (2009, 341-355).
6. Walton, "Transparent Pictures," 261.
7. Walton, "Transparent Pictures," 253.
8. Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation." *Critical Inquiry* 7:3 (1981, 577-603); and Vivian Mizrahi, "Seeing Through Photographs: Photography as a Transparent Visual Medium." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79:1 (2021, 52-63). Photography's automaticity is sometimes taken to imply that it cannot be an art, since it seems to preclude intentionality (e.g. Scruton 1981); for persuasive arguments to the contrary, see Davies, "Scruton" and Phillips, "Automatism."
9. Diarmuid Costello, *On Photography: A Philosophical Inquiry*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
10. See, e.g., Gregory Currie, "Photography, Painting and Perception." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49:1 (1991, 23-9); Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualisation: Thinking through Photography*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997; Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin, "On the Epistemic Value of Photographs." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62:2 (2004, 197-210); and Dawn M. Phillips, "Photography and Causation: Responding to Scruton's Scepticism." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49:4 (2009, 327-40). But see also Lopes, "Aesthetics," who offers a sophisticated defense of transparency which accommodates many of the criticisms usually levelled at it.
11. E.g., Currie, "Painting and Perception," 23-6 and Cohen and Meskin, "Epistemic Value," 71-2 and 75-7.
12. E.g., Maynard, *Engine*; Phillips, "Photography and Causation"; and Costello, *On Photography*, Ch. 3.
13. See Lopes, "Understanding Pictures," 180-2, 186.
14. Walton, "Transparent Pictures," and Costello and Phillips, "Automatism."
15. Assuming, that is, that manugraphic representation does not rely on processes which can bypass the deployment of concepts and beliefs. Lopes argues convincingly that the psychological evidence shows that this assumption is, in fact, unjustified; Lopes, "Understanding Pictures," 180-2, 186-7.
16. Miguel F. Santos Silva and Scott Eldridge, *The Ethics of Photojournalism in the Digital Age*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, 88.

17. Megan O'Hearn, "Seeing Is Believing: Early War Photography." ARTSTOR November 11, 2016, <https://www.artstor.org/2016/11/11/seeing-is-believing-early-war-photography/#:~:text=The%20first%20photographs%20of%20war,American%20war%20in%20Saltillo%2C%20Mexico.>
18. Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography: A Cultural History*. New York: Routledge, 1997, 5-6 and Silva and Eldridge, *Ethics of Photojournalism*, 89-92.
19. *Ibid.*, 1-13.
20. Claud Cockburn, *In Time of Trouble*. London: Hart Davis, 1956, 252.
21. Silva and Eldridge, *Ethics of Photojournalism*, 58.
22. *Ibid.*, 87.
23. M. Schudson and C.W. Anderson, "News Production and Organizations." *The handbook of journalism studies*. Eds. K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, 88-101.
24. Barbie Zelizer, "Words Against Images: Positioning Newswork in the Age of Photography." *Newsworkers: Towards a history of rank and file*. Eds. Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennen, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, 152
25. Silva and Eldridge, *Ethics of Photojournalism*, 57.
26. Associated Press, "News Values and Principles." The Associated Press, 2023, <https://www.ap.org/about/news-values-and-principles/>. Though any photographer worth their salt can confirm that these techniques can yield surprisingly radical alterations.
27. NPPA, "Code of ethics." National Press Photographers Association, 2023, <https://nppa.org/code-ethics>.
28. On standard photography as an epistemic practice, see Dominic McIver Lopes, *Four Arts of Photography: An Essay in Philosophy*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016, 109ff.
29. Stuart Hall, "The Determination of News Photographs." In *Crime and Media: A Reader*, ed. Chris Greer. New York: Routledge, 2010 [1973], 131.
30. See Alice Everly, "'The Days Are Long, But The Years Are Short': Records of New Parenthood in the Pandemic." MAS thesis, University of British Columbia 2022.
31. I have borrowed the subject/object distinction from Lopes, "Four Arts," 59.
32. This argument is inspired by Peter Alward, "Transparent Representation: Photography and the Art of Casting." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 70:1 (2012, 9-18) and Lopes, "Four Arts," 58-64, 118-9.
33. On our trust in standard photographic practice, see Lopes, "Four Arts," 111.
34. Quoted in Silva and Eldridge, *Ethics of Photojournalism*, 110.
35. Phillips, "Photography and Causation."
36. Indeed, individual perception itself may not be up to the task.
37. Strictly speaking, the "focal subject" is just one of the photograph's objects; I use the term here because it helpfully highlights the fact that some objects matter more than others.
38. On the kinds of appreciative norms and conventions which inform different photographic practices, see Lopes, "Understanding Pictures," 99-103, 108-13.
39. Noam Chomsky, "Noam Chomsky on How To Prevent World War III." By Nathan J. Robinson, *Current Affairs* (13 April, 2022), <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/04/noam-chomsky-on-how-to-prevent-world-war-iii#:~:text=I%20was%20a%20junior%20counselor,I%20was%20so%20appalled.>
40. Quoted in Michael Zhang, "This is Why the World Needs War Photographers." *Petapixel* January 15, 2016, <https://petapixel.com/2016/01/15/this-is-why-the-world-needs-war-photographers/>.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Ashley Norman, "The Ethics and Morality of War Photography." *Medium* February 23, 2018,

<https://anorman67.medium.com/the-ethics-and-morality-of-war-photography-bad74230696>.

43. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/06/02/nick-ut-vietnam-war-photo-kim-phuc/>

44. Michel Foucault, *Discourse & Truth and Parrēsia*. Eds. Henri-Paul Fruchaud, Daniele Lorenzini and Nancy Luxon, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019 [1982-3].

45. *Ibid.*, 40.

46. *Ibid.*, 42.

47. *Ibid.*, 45. Note that Foucault thinks the parrhesiastes speaks the truth, not just her truth; parrhesia requires that what is said be actually true and not just believed to be true (*Ibid.*, 41-2).

**forms of truth-telling.
parrhesia and documentary**

stefanie baumann

INTRODUCTION

Approaching documentary is not as simple as it may appear. Not only is the term documentary itself highly controversial – is it a genre? a method? an approach? an aesthetic position? a “mode of response to film material?”¹ opposed to fiction? – it also encompasses such a wide range of very diverse formats that it is difficult to get a clear idea of what it actually refers to. For instance, the term may encompass a wide range of filmic practices, from sober television documentaries designed to inform the general public about specific issues, to high-budget blockbusters and entertainment formats produced by the culture industry for mass audiences,

to essayistic or experimental films shown at niche festivals or art galleries, and even to independent militant cinema created as a tool for political education. However, if there is one assumption that is common to all documentaries, it is that they are meant to expose, represent, reveal or problematise reality in order to convey a truth content about it. As Carl Plantinga puts it, “People *do* expect of the documentary that it is intended to offer a reliable record, account of, argument about, or analysis of some element of the actual world, that is, they expect an assertedly veridical representation.”² This inherent claim to a certain veracity has always been central to the understanding of documentary. To be sure, how this truth is to be understood, and how it stands in relation both to reality and to the images and sounds that are used to mediate it, has been a matter of debate ever since John Grierson coined the term in the 1920s and defined it as a “creative treatment of reality.” There is an inherent tension between the direct association of documentaries with the reality they address, often corroborated by the use of indexical audio-visual material, and the filmmaker’s artistic mediation of the empirical material, through which the latter acquires its meaning. What is conveyed in a documentary, however neutral it may appear, is always a product of the subjective mediation of objective facts through the filmmaker’s aesthetic, thematic, and political choices, as well as her use of cinematic techniques such as framing, editing, rhythm, etc. Nevertheless, unlike fiction films that may or may not aim to be truthful, documentaries are essentially understood as a means of “truth telling” through the language of film, be it through affirmative representations of the reality it deals with (its “assertive stance,” as Carl Plantinga puts it),³ or through the problematisation of the real itself, as Jacques Rancière understands its particular agency.⁴ As David LaRocca puts it, “[d]espite its controversial, unsettled status, documentary film restlessly conjures the disclosure of truth by encoding events, experiences, and expressions that we recognize as corresponding to the world (or worlds) we inhabit”⁵ Should it therefore be considered *parrhesiastic*? What would be the conditions of possibility for a *parrhesiastic* documentary? And conversely, can documentaries, as contemporary means of truth-telling, expose anything about the conditions of possibility of *parrhesia* today?

Michel Foucault, who notoriously brought the idea of *parrhesia* back into view in his last lectures, would surely not consider all documentaries as genuine *parrhesiastic* forms. For *parrhesia* is neither truth-telling *per se*, nor is it a specific technique used to produce specific effects, as rhetoric is. Rather, the term refers to a particular modality of truth-telling that relates questions of veridiction to the ethos of the subject, as well as to the reigning power structures. The truth at stake in *parrhesia* is a particular one. It is not a matter of metaphysics or ontology, nor is it a strictly factual knowledge in the scientific sense, but a truth that touches the fields of ethics and politics and directly affects the social existence of both the one who speaks and the one who listens. *Parrhesia* always seeks to have an impact on the ethical conduct of life and the formation of subjects – whence Foucault’s interest in the concept as the first stage of his genealogy of the critical attitude and the practice of truth-telling in Western societies.⁶ What distinguishes *parrhesia* most sharply from other basic modalities of truth-telling – Foucault identifies in ancient Greece that of prophecy, that of wisdom, and that of the technician, expert, or teacher⁷ – is that it necessarily involves a risk for the subject who decides to speak out. “*Parrēsia* is a criticism, it is a criticism, a self-criticism or a criticism oriented towards the others, but always in situations where the speaker is in a position of inferiority to the interlocutor”, Foucault writes. “In *parrēsia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness.”⁸ While acknowledging that the various modes of truth-telling never appear in their pure form and are usually intermingled to some extent, Foucault argues that the necessary condition of *parrhesiastic* expression is that it comes with a danger for the *parrhesiast* that the latter knowingly accepts. It presupposes not only courage, but also conviction and the will to change the current situation. Being a *parrhesiast* means fulfilling the moral obligation to speak truth to power in order to challenge the status quo. For contrary to other truth-tellers, the *parrhesiast* “acts not as integrating agent but as disintegrating factor or agent.”⁹ *Parrhesiastic* truth disrupts commonly acknowledged certainties rather than corroborating established norms.

For documentary filmmakers, it is undoubtedly very rare to take any kind of actual risks in order to convey a truth that is not (yet) commonly accepted and susceptible of offending or hurting the spectators. Educational formats, often commissioned by authoritative institutions, appear to be intended to communicate a rather neutral truth for the sake of knowledge transmission, without actually confronting the socio-political conditions in which it is embedded. On the contrary, they inherently endorse the current order of society by accepting the notion of knowledge as one of its separate and detachable components, without addressing their entanglements in the dominant power structures and the ideological agency of their claim to objectivity.¹⁰ Many commercial formats, in turn, are produced by companies seeking audience success and profit. When official instances, populist interests or profit orientation inflict topical choices, formal criteria, and formatting constraints, the result may be interesting, fascinating, enlightening, or entertaining, but it is not *parrhesiastic* in an emphatic sense. Rather than speaking on their own behalf, filmmakers working with such production companies are usually instructed to adapt the forms of conveying content to the prevailing viewing habits, such as the appearance of authenticity or neutrality or the use of certain aesthetic strategies such as emotional music, special effects, normalised narrative patterns or fast cuts to increase the film's attractiveness. But subjection to any authoritative agency is contrary to the ethos of the *parrhesiast*, and the use of codified effects for the purpose of appealing to the spectator is antipodal to *parrhesia* – “[p]arrēsia is external to all the artificial methods of rhetoric.”¹¹ Like the ancient rhetorician, who may or may not speak the truth but always aims to convince his audience, documentary filmmakers who adopt standardised, normalised or artificially spectacular forms to respond to market demands or to produce effects of neutrality may or may not convey the truth – this question is only secondary to the film's achievement. Obviously, the documentary film cannot avoid using rhetorical devices. What conflicts with the idea of *parrhesia* is the use of established rhetorical strategies that aim to evoke affective reactions (“parrēsia is the zero degree of those rhetorical figures which intensify the emotions of the audience,”¹² as Foucault puts it). In a genuinely *parrhesiastic* film,

truth is expressed as frankly and straightforwardly as possible, “without reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it,”¹³ because the filmmaker is less concerned with commercial success than with the critical agency of its content, which is the reason for its existence.¹⁴

APPROACHING A CONTEMPORARY PARRHESIAST: LAURA POITRAS’ *CITIZENFOUR*

One of the first cinematic works that come to mind when thinking of the notion of *parrhesia* in the context of documentary filmmaking is surely Laura Poitras’ *Citizenfour*, which has been released in 2014. Certainly, its portrayal of whistle-blower Edward Snowden during the days when he revealed that the US government’s NSA programme had been secretly collecting metadata of citizens demonstrates an example of the “courage to tell the truth” which characterises *parrhesiastes*. Snowden deliberately put his freedom and safety at risk to inform the public about the far-reaching surveillance programmes of the American State that violated privacy rights on a global scale. He understood that speaking out would cause a huge scandal in the media and international relations, and he was perfectly aware that leaking secret information and revealing his identity was likely to lead to his persecution, imprisonment, or forced exile. Nevertheless, he felt the urge to disclose the material to which he had privileged access for the sake of justice, the right to privacy, and the transparency of governmental surveillance strategies. “I am more willing to risk imprisonment, or any other negative outcome personally, than I am willing to risk the containment of my intellectual freedom and that of those others around me whom I care for,” he states in Poitras’s film. He further adds that he does not consider his act as self-sacrifice, because his efforts to promote transparency make him “feel good about [his] human experience.” It was ethically imperative for him to disclose what he knew. Gerald Posselt understands Snowden’s attitude accordingly as an example of the “constitutive connection between *parrhesia* and the care of the self.”¹⁵

What makes Snowden’s case a contemporary example of *parrhesia* is this complexion: he strongly believed in his ethical duty to speak out publicly against

governmental injustice and obfuscation, regardless of the risks he thereby faces, for the good of the society of which he is a part. By showing how principles such as personal rights, transparency, and justice are being undermined by the very government that upholds them as the foundation of democracy, he triggered a global conversation about privacy, surveillance techniques, and civil liberties in both the digital and the analogue socio-political world. Rather than denouncing a singular person or individual fraud, he criticises the systemic abuse of people's rights by the state apparatus, under the pretext of increased security needs. His revelations, generating far-reaching problems in the relationship between the state, tech and other large corporations, and the global population, convey his genuinely critical attitude, understood with Foucault as "the art of voluntary insubordination, ... of reflected intractability,"¹⁶ "of not being governed like that and at that cost ... of not being governed quite so much."¹⁷

While Snowden certainly epitomizes a sort of contemporary *parrhesiast*, it is less obvious to grasp the role that the Poitras' documentary *Citizenfour* plays in the affair. What exactly is the relation between the film and the notion of *parrhesia*? Is it a candid portrayal of a young courageous man, the ethical stance towards the truth that he expresses, his determination to defy his government, and his way of dealing with the dangers he thereby faced? Or does it do something else than to show a fearless subject speaking truth to power? Is it possible, in a way other than as representation, to relate documentary films to *parrhesia*? Laura Poitras was certainly concerned with the critical agency of her film. Many aspects of *Citizenfour* suggest that it is indeed about *parrhesia*. First and foremost, the filmmaker's involvement in the very act of making Snowden's revelations public was undoubtedly crucial. Like Snowden, Poitras took risks when she decided to collaborate with him in this affair, and without a doubt, she was aiming at revealing the truth for the sake of democracy and public rights. Since she had released the first two parts of her trilogy on post-9/11 US strategies in the "war on terror," of which *Citizenfour* is the final part, she had been under surveillance by the US secret services. Her personal ethos as an independent journalist, her experience

with the question of state control and her journalistic research into secret state policies certainly motivated Snowden to choose her as a collaborator. Without the skills and network of Poitras, Glenn Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill, the other independent journalists involved in the affair, who collaboratively leaked the compromising material to the press, it would have been much more difficult to attract public attention on such a large scale.

But on the other hand, the film itself, while making these dangers and entanglements between personal commitment, public responsibility and power structures palpable, relies on a different modality of truth-telling than that of *parrhesia*. The point is not to reveal an embarrassing truth to an interlocutor in a position of superiority. Rather than confronting an authority, *Citizenfour* aims to reach a broad audience of people who have all been betrayed by government initiatives – a community of peers. This is to a certain extent also true for Snowden, whose declarations were transmitted through various international mass media instead of having been directly addressed to his bosses. But Snowden clearly meant to challenge the power structures themselves, including his superiors for whom he had been working for years, knowing that the only possible way to do so consisted in making his claims public. The documentary *Citizenfour*, for its part, was released when the media scandal had already taken place months prior to the film's release, and when the journalists' vulnerability had already been mitigated by the intense media attention of the case. One of the effects of the film is that it has ratified the public awareness of the case. It has kept alive critical debates about state power and privacy, months after the case hit the headlines. But it has done something else as well: it has drawn attention to the human aspect of the *parrhesiastic* act. While the media spectacle surrounding the scandal has completely overshadowed what made Snowden a *parrhesiast* – his genuine ethics, his humility, his determination – the documentary takes us back to the fragile situation when it was still uncertain what would happen. *Citizenfour* captures the personal dimension of the complex process of unravelling what the US government tried to withhold from the public. The documentary exposes

the precarious conditions under which Snowden's courageous disclosure came into being and deploys the safeguards and the sensitive construction of trustful relationships on which it depended. In a way, it shows the flip side of the media-spectacle, the backdrop of the scandalous revelations in the news: the delicate correspondence between Snowden and Poitras, which required a high level of encryption and enhanced security measures, the intensity of the personal pressure on everyone involved, and the complex global imbrications that needed to be considered for it to happen. Without psychologising or biographical storytelling, Poitras' film draws a sympathetic picture of Snowden's personality, his ethical integrity, humility, and respectable intentions, through their encounters online and in person, in a hotel room in Hong Kong. Eschewing spectacular formal means, *Citizenfour* is remarkably sober: the setting is unpretentious, no special effects, dramatic music scores or other cinematic devices to heighten suspense are employed. Still, the film manages to appeal to a wide audience. *Citizenfour* was not only granted more than 30 awards, including the prestigious Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature in 2015, but also had a real box office success. In the reviews that appeared in the press, the documentary is often described as extremely suspenseful, with many commentators equating it to an espionage thriller or a dystopian horror film.¹⁸ On that point, Poitras herself asserts:

... while I'm not bending my practice to speak to that audience, or making compromises, it does have the potential to reach a popular audience. And I love that. What's so beautiful about cinema is that it's a populist medium. *Citizenfour* fits within a long tradition of Hollywood films about the individual against the state.¹⁹

Indeed, her documentary fits a recurring figure in fiction cinema, and yet it does not quite fit. Snowden appears both as a hero who risks his life for his moral convictions and as an ordinary, modest, easily accessible twenty-something guy who does not want to be the centre of attention. Poitras blurs the lines between Hollywood tropes and actual people in real circumstances. Her film is at the same time a sensitive portrait of a contemporary *parrhesiast*, seen through the eyes of

one of his allies, and a discreet problematisation of the conditions of privacy and political dissent in times of digital surveillance by those in power. Undoubtedly, *Citizenfour* conveys something about *parrhesia*, its conditions and risks in contemporary societies, in which governmentality surreptitiously permeates private life. Freed from the pressure to get information out quickly under the most precarious of conditions, and suspending the clamour of media spectacle, Poitras' documentary opens up a space for reflection on the relationship between power, truth and subjective action. *Citizenfour* shifts the focus from *parrhesia* as such to its conditions of possibility in times of digital surveillance.

THE FILMMAKER AS *PARRHESIAST*: RENÉ VAUTIER, JAN NĚMEC, AND RADICAL FILMMAKING

There are some examples of more directly *parrhesiastic* films. The figure of the documentary filmmaker as *parrhesiast*, and of filmic language as a vehicle for the expression of subjective convictions for the sake of engaging the viewer, has taken various forms in the history of documentary. René Vautier's 1950 short documentary *Afrique 50* is a paradigmatic example. Vautier, a former active militant in the *Résistance* against the German occupation, was commissioned by the official French *Ligue de l'Enseignement* to make an educational film about "real life" in the African colonies. He was instructed to provide a positive representation of the living conditions of the inhabitants of several West-African colonies, but quickly realised that the situation was in fact all but disastrous for locals. Rather than projecting a propagandistic image of French humanism and charity, as required by the authorities, he decided to turn his lens on the inhumane conditions and the violent oppression and exploitation to which the population was subjected by the colonial power. Filming such scenes was a deliberate act of dissidence, and their association with a personal commentary linking the images to the de facto violence and structural racism of the French administration, only enhanced the subversive agency of Vautier's film. The voice-over directly addresses the public, stressing that these atrocities are being committed for the sake of France's wealth, and that turning a blind eye to this appalling situation makes

the audience complicit in the government's abuses. Vautier's film confronts the French authorities for their racist colonial behaviour and blatant, hypocritical propaganda, and the spectators for their silent acceptance of the unacceptable state of affairs. Reputed to be the first French anti-colonial film, *Afrique 50* is a critical mirror for the French government and population. For 40 years it was banned in France, and Vautier was sentenced to prison for illegal filming and for retaining confiscated reels. Although he knew what he was risking by filming, he continued to make documentaries about the atrocities of the French colonialists. A few years later, he joined the Algerian independence fighters of the FLN in clandestinity in order to document their struggle and bring it to the attention of an international audience. Another example of *parrhesiastic* filmmaking is Jan Němec's *Oratorio for Prague* released in 1968. Like Vautier, Němec paid dearly for his courage: his film was immediately prohibited by the authorities, and Němec was banned from making films and forced into exile in 1974. *Oratorio for Prague* was initially intended to document the peaceful demonstrations of the Prague Spring, in which the filmmaker took an active part. More than half the film follows those demonstrating for freedom and the visionary politicians involved. But the voice-over narration makes it clear from the outset that their optimism was short-lived, and that the planned reforms of democratisation, economic decentralisation, and civil rights would be brutally repressed by the Soviet military. The film's footage, shot on the ground as the events unfolded, reveals the violent crackdown on the demonstrators and the invasion by heavily armed Soviet soldiers. Both films reveal the attempts of those in power to conceal the violent nature of their rule and the repression of the people in draconian ways. In both instances, the filmmakers refused to be intimidated, confronted the authorities directly and felt morally obliged to intervene in the situation by releasing their films. Both films combine audiovisual material shot on location with a subjective voice-over commentary explaining its critical pertinence.

The use of documentary as an audio-visual language to confront power structures through cinematic means became an important tool in the politically charged

landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, when a wave of radical documentary filmmakers from both the Global South and the so-called First World emerged as strong voices of dissent against the domination of neo-colonialism, capitalism, and hegemonic forms of politics and culture. In the crisis-ridden world of the cold war, anticolonial struggles, and global conflicts, alternatives to the dominant power constellation seemed as possible as desirable, and independent filmmakers understood their activity as part of the struggles to which they were committed. Many of these filmmakers used the medium of film in a subversive manner, not only to critique the mechanisms of oppression that perpetuate racial inequality, political and economic domination by imperialist powers, and the continued exploitation of people in the Third World, but also to challenge the hegemony of dominant imagery that shapes our perception of reality through radical formal experiments. The question of form – of how and through which artistic means to mediate dissenting content – became increasingly central to counter the instrumentalisation of mass media for political ends. Activists, artists and independent filmmakers criticized the pretensions of official representations of reality to be neutral vehicles of truth and countered hegemonic audiovisual policies with strategies such as the use of radical montage techniques to relate separate elements and construct different meanings, and the dissociation of direct sound from images to generate critical distance.

An important film in this regard is Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968). Both experimental agit-prop documentary and essay film, it exposes the multiple facets of neo-colonialist violence in Argentina and abroad through a radical montage of heterogeneous material such as archival footage, clandestinely recorded material, political analysis, quotations of revolutionaries like Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Aimé Césaire, and satire. *La hora de los hornos* offers a fundamental critique of global capitalism and imperialism, revealing the systemic dimension of neo-colonial oppression through instances of everyday violence in Latin America, in three parts that together run over four hours. The explicit aim is – akin to Brecht's

theatre – to activate the audience, challenging the passive position into which they are conditioned by many other cinematic productions, including Hollywood movies and *cinéma d'auteur*. “The film mobilizes, fostering motor and mental activity rather than self-indulgent fantasy,”²⁰ as Robert Stam writes. “The spectator is taught to distrust images or, better, to see through them to their underlying structures. The film strives to enable the spectator to penetrate the veil of appearances, to dispel the mists of ideology through an act of revolutionary decoding.”²¹ Indeed, because it intervened directly in the realm of representation and was thus capable of disrupting it from within, documentary film was a powerful means of conveying truth for Solanas, Getino and many other radical filmmakers of the time. A critical practice of truth-telling through audiovisual means, capable of engaging interlocutors not only through persuasive rational argumentation but also through sensitive provocation of normalised perceptions of reality, was called for to transform society on a global scale. The rhetorical strategies of leading media were directly targeted and exposed in their system-preserving bias by films like *La hora de los hornos*. Only when that which appears natural, unavoidable or unquestionable is problematised in its very appearance, only when the correlation between a standardised perception of something as real and the political effectiveness of a ruling system is cracked open, they argued, would people be able to grasp the whole complex of socio-economic and political intricacies in which they are caught and seriously question their place in the world. The way in which truth could be conveyed would be transformative, through dissenting ways of showing, addressing and reflecting reality.

CRITIQUE IN CRISIS

Meanwhile, much of the confidence in the disruptive agency of audiovisual production has been frustrated in neoliberal democracies worldwide. With the transformations of the geopolitical situation since the struggles for independence and the cold war have come to an end, the conditions for critical filmmaking have fundamentally changed. After the former colonies gained independence, hopes for new forms of living together beyond the dominant social organizations embodied

by the superpowers – neoliberal capitalism and Soviet-style communism – quickly faded as most of the newly created nations adopted their models or ended up as dictatorships. When the world was divided into superpowers, each interested in promoting its own form of government as superior to the other, the endeavours of radical filmmakers to convey oppositional truths were perceived as a threat to the dominant powers. *Parrhesia* through the means of film was possible when it was likely to generate dissent and impact the political and moral understanding of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. But since the end of the Cold War, the global embrace of capitalism and neoliberalism has diminished the threat of an imminent overthrow by ideological opponents. What used to be considered acceptable or offensive by state power structures is now more than ever a question of economic success. At the same time, as Stoffel Debuysere writes,

[t]he overflow of democratic mass individualism, that which the 1968 generation was supposedly seeking all along, has allegedly culminated in an infinite drift of narcissistic consumers who do not care for anything but the instant satisfaction of their own needs and desires: this is the narrative that the contemporary left has embraced. The same criticism that used to denounce the society of the spectacle and the mythology of consumer ideologies in view of possible change had started to turn on itself, trapping itself in an endless vicious cycle in which the power of the market can no longer be distinguished from the power of its denunciation.²²

What is more, the very idea of critique in audiovisual media has been absorbed into the realm of mainstream media. As virtually any subject, no matter how shocking, provocative, or otherwise disturbing, has been assimilated by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the culture industry, and as radical formal means have been integrated into the normalised catalogue of stylistic devices and are now perfectly compatible with popular documentaries, independent oppositional filmmaking is losing more and more of its agency to unsettle the viewer.²³ What once had the potential to disrupt has now become one rhetorical device among others, turning “criticism” in audiovisual media into a sometimes more, sometimes less attractive feature in mainstream media and hollowing it out in the process. In a recent

publication with the evocative title *Kill the Documentary*, filmmaker and author Jill Godmillow articulates a harsh indictment of what she calls conventional or liberal documentary formats, or DAWKI, “documentary as we know it.” With such films, she writes, “we are securely ensconced in spectacle,”²⁴ as they “produce a common mindset, an egotism that eternally places the citizen/viewer at the center of the universe, looking out into the represented world, discovering the problems of other people. It’s a kind of cultural imperialism, as if our knowledge exempts us from having had any part of damage we find there.”²⁵ Many documentaries shown on big screens, Internet platforms or streaming services fall into this category, reproducing common schemes of reality perception. The effect of such documentary formats is diametrically opposed to that of *parrhesia*, even if their purpose is to uncover alarming content: Rather than prompting the interlocutor to reflect on and question their own existence as a subject within society, and to question the power relations in which they are trapped, they comfort them in their privileged, passive, self-righteous position.

By contrast, “what makes [something] *parrēsia*”, writes Foucault, “is that the introduction, the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. *Parrēsia* does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk.”²⁶ *Parrhesia* necessarily bears a transformative potential; it intervenes in a particular historical situation so as to affect the interlocutor as an ethical person and to generate change. It is important to remind that the idea of *parrhesia* is not only bound up with the figure of the *parrhesiast* as a courageous, sincere, and virtuous subject – a figure that has arguably been assimilated in many commercially oriented documentaries, such as Michael Moore’s films – but also with the particular moment in which dominant ideas are challenged through the intercession of her truth-telling. This latter aspect is also emphasised by Godmillow, who stubbornly continues to advocate documentaries capable of critical truth telling and transformative effects. She calls them post-realist documentaries, and describes them as “performative utterances, acts of resistance,

and aesthetic rejoinders to a world drowning in its own image.”²⁷ Such critical documentaries “disrupt and destroy the ‘you’ that the conventional documentary has nurtured for so long.”²⁸ They “always seek ... to crack the code of the status quo, to drill even small holes in our social imaginaire, our naturalized worldview that suggests what is understood as normal, reasonable, commonsensical, and generally accepted by all.”²⁹ In her book, Godmillow provides a wide range of very diverse examples of such inherently critical films from different historical times and geographical contexts. Many of them can be approached to the concept of *parrhesia*, not necessarily because their makers risked their life, but because they bear a potential to appeal to their audience through disquieting truths that affect them directly. What they all have in common, though, is that their forms are anything but ready-made rhetorical devices.

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO THE *PARRHESIASTIC* GAME

Today, it is important to consider not only socio-political conditions but also the crisis of the notion of truth and the changing status of images. With the production of audiovisual documents no longer limited to professionals, viewers are now potential producers who are aware of the technical possibilities to fabricate, fake, and distort images. The widespread use of smartphones allows anyone to record images and sounds, combine different files, reappropriate or manipulate existing documents, and upload or share them publicly on the Internet. Meanwhile, the difference between mere opinion and truth is becoming increasingly blurred in public discourse. This raises the question of how documentaries can remain disruptive and avoid being lost in the maelstrom of seemingly equivalent positions. At stake today is not only the question of truth as such, but also that of its potency. In his documentary *The Viewing Booth* (2019), Israeli filmmaker Ra’anan Alexandrowicz problematises the potential to engage viewers through the use of raw documentary footage alongside questions of trust in media images. In his film, Alexandrowicz invites a young student, Maia Levy, to watch and comment on several Palestinian videos shot in collaboration with the Israeli human rights organisation Bet’selem and published on Youtube.

The setup is simple: the filmmaker sits in a small room in front of two screens, while Maia is shown another computer in a separate room, presumably used for dubbing. Maia, daughter of Israeli parents and very “pro-Israeli,” as she says in the film, reads most of the images as fictions designed to manipulate the viewer. She is convinced that the most disturbing scenes were staged for the purposes of anti-Israeli propaganda, and remains very critical of what she sees, refusing to be affected by it in her perception of the situation on the ground in the West Bank. When Alexandrowicz asks her to return for a second viewing, this time of the recordings of herself watching the YouTube videos, her attitude toward the images has become even more unrelenting. Maia’s reactions and reflections are interspersed with conversations and debates she has with the director about the nature of documentary filmmaking, the reliability of visual evidence, and the role of empathy in understanding complex socio-political issues. It is becoming increasingly clear that it is impossible to find common ground to discuss the truth of the matter, and the one who is being challenged is Alexandrowicz himself. As a former Israeli soldier who had experienced very similar scenes, and as a political filmmaker who had made several critical documentaries about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, he was convinced of the transformative power of documentary material. Maia’s reactions demonstrate to him that neither the visual content nor witness accounts have enough compelling power to break through the belief systems that determine what is considered real and what is not. The film’s focus on the violent oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli military occupation is overshadowed by the question of the feasibility of political filmmaking in an era where viewers are increasingly critical of the indexical image and its potential for conveying some kind of factual truth. What is emerging more clearly is the question as to how a basis can be built for the perception of objective conditions beyond ideological divisions, and how the audience’s willingness to deal ethically with complicated truths can be aroused.

What can the widespread doubt about both the representation of reality and reality itself teach us about the challenges to the concept of *parrhesia* today? It may be

productive to shift the focus from the person of the *parrhesiast* to his interlocutor. Foucault notes that it is indeed the auditor that grants the *parrhesiast* the right to free speech. The *parrhesiastic* game, as Foucault calls it, remains impotent if the audience does not recognise it as such:

For if the parrhesiast is someone who, by telling the truth, the whole truth, regardless of any other consideration, risks bringing his relationship to the other into question, and even risks his life, on the other hand, the person to whom this truth is told – whether this is the assembled people deliberating on the best decisions to take, or the Prince, the tyrant or king to whom advice must be given, or the friend one is guiding – this person (people, king, friend), if he wants to play the role proposed to him by the parrhesiast in telling him the truth, must accept the truth, however much it may hurt generally accepted opinion in the Assembly, the Prince's passions or interests, or the individual's ignorance or blindness. The people, the Prince, and the individual must accept the game of *parrēsia*; they must play it themselves and recognize that they have to listen to the person who takes the risk of telling them the truth. Thus the true game of *parrēsia* will be established on the basis of this kind of pact which means that if the parrhesiast demonstrates his courage by telling the truth despite and regardless of everything, the person to whom this *parrēsia* is addressed will have to demonstrate his greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth.³⁰

The audience of a documentary has to engage in the “*parrhesiastic* bond” that binds both the speaker and the listener to the truth. This requires an attitude that differs significantly from the passive mindset of the consumer: it involves courage and openness on the part of the person to whom the truth is addressed, a “courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears.”³¹ Listeners must be prepared to take the truth seriously as something that affects them directly. In many parts of the world, speaking truth to power, whether through films that directly address reality or through public speech, remains dangerous. In countries

like Iran, Syria, Russia, North Korea and China, censorship and persecution is a brutal reality. Despite the risks, courageous filmmakers have insisted on bringing the unvarnished truth they believe in to light and calling for radical change. Yet even supposedly liberal countries like Germany and the United States censor or cancel the screening of documentaries, especially those that address the situation of Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. A case in point is the American documentary “Israelism,” about the growing shift in attitudes toward Israel among young Jewish Americans who have been raised to be patriotic defenders of Israel, whose screening has been cancelled on numerous occasions in both countries. To be sure, this tendency is not limited to documentary formats, rather it seems to be a general trend of “philosemitic McCarthyism,”³² as Susan Neiman aptly calls it. Yet, censorship and cancellations demonstrate that such forms of truth-telling are still perceived as significant, and their impact is judged as potential challenges to an existing order. However, if the truth presented in documentary formats is deemed irrelevant because neither the addressed authorities nor the concerned viewers are affected by the films in any other way than a consumerist one, the concept of *parrhesia* (and with it the idea of a critical attitude opened up by audiovisual productions) becomes superfluous.

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NOTES

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7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 46.
9. *Ibid.*, 65.
10. See: Stefanie Baumann, "Images of the Real. Introductory Notes 1." *Cinema – Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, 12 (2020, 8-21).
11. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth*, 30.
12. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Ed. Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Sémiotext(e), 2001, 21.
13. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government Of Self And Others II: Lectures At The Collège de France 1983-1984*. Eds. Frédéric Gros, François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana, Arnold I. Davidson & Graham Burchell, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011, 10.
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17. *Ibid.*, 29.
18. See for example A. O. Scott, "Intent on Defying an All-Seeing Eye: 'Citizenfour,' a Documentary about Edward J. Snowden." *New York Times*, October 23, 2014; Scott Macaulay, "In the Eye of the Storm: Laura Poitras on CITIZENFOUR." *Filmmaker Magazine*, October 20, 2014; Richard Corliss, "Citizenfour is Hollywood's Scariest Chiller," *Times*, October 26, 2014; see also the reviews section on the website of the film <https://citizenfourfilm.com/reviews>, accessed on August 2 2023.
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21. *Ibid.*, 276.

22. See Stoffel Debuysere, "Notes on Militant Cinema (1967-1977)." available online: <https://www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=2075>, accessed August 2, 2023.
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27. Jill Godmillow, *Kill the Documentary*, 32.
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30. Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 12-13.
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“carceral archipelago”: an abolitionist dialogue

adam elliot-cooper, geo maher, d-7

D-7: Our guests are Adam Elliott-Cooper and Geo Maher. Let us first discuss the origins of policing in your motherlands.

Adam: Policing develops in uneven ways across different parts of Europe, for instance, the police forces in Britain, the US, and Britain’s Caribbean colonies cross fertilise, and thus emerge simultaneously.¹ But I think it’s worth noting a few things. First, in the British context, we might call proto-policing or proto-police forces, weren’t called the police, but might be called the yeomanry, or simply the army. They have been around for a very long time and their purpose was generally to protect property – that of the aristocrats, other landlords and parts of the ruling

class. But also connected to that – to control or repress peasant rebellions, when people demanded better working conditions, lower taxes or other kinds of rights, freedoms and liberties.²

We really begin to see this set of institutions becoming more formalised with the emergence of wage labour. In other words, when larger numbers of people start earning money for a living, rather than being paid through the products that they are able to yield through their agricultural work. This is connected to property, but also imperialism and, therefore, race in a number of ways. The first is that if people are being paid a wage in places like the docks of London, Liverpool or Bristol in the Britain, then property owners, merchants, and other sections of the capitalist class wanted to prevent their workers from taking any of the products that they were helping to move from one place to another, right? So this is where we begin to see a police force emerging in places like London. Similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, we also see Britain's police forces or proto-police forces being more formalised in order to control Britain's colonised and, particularly, its enslaved populations. This became particularly important for Britain following a number of rebellions that took place across the British Caribbean, after the Haitian Revolution in the early 1800s. On both sides of the Atlantic we see the emergence of capitalism coupled with empire playing a crucial role in policing oppressed people, whether they be the working classes of Europe, but also the colonised and enslaved subjects in places across the Americas.³

Geo: Yeah, I agree with the way that Adam has described that history. To add a little bit of the US dimension, it's important to insist that this long history is a history, as Adam's described it, of property and imperial colonialism – the long prehistory of the police. We've got this story that police, in the northern part of the United States, emerged out of appropriation of the professional London police model; and it was more in the south that the police emerged from slave catchers, from those forces that were explicitly designed to control enslaved African people. It's a reproduction of a sort of American Black legend, in which the north is free of all sin, and the south is the home of the repressive racist prehistory of the police.

It's simply not true, right? The London model was derived through colonial and imperial intervention, it acquired its militarised characteristics in places like Haiti, Nicaragua, and in the Philippines. When military occupiers came back home, the so-called professionalised police were designed across the United States, doing so along military lines.

This is no accident because we've got a long pattern that persists today in which certain populations are coded as insurgent military foes, colonised populations internally or externally, Black Americans, Brown Americans, and others are always seen as subject to end of deserving military force. This intersection with the military in contemporary policing is no accident. The two parameters crucial to bear in mind are: white supremacy and property. When we're talking about contemporary policing, it's crucial to maintain a balance between the two because you can explain in the US context everything that contemporary police do – or the way that they operate or their overarching function – through either of those parameters. Police operate how they do not only as servants of capital, but because they also respond so often to white fear and anxiety expressed specifically around Black mobility. When slaves are ostensibly freed, all of a sudden the police became incredibly important to control the movement of these free people through the process of criminalisation and, ultimately, convict leasing and mass incarceration. Today, globally and almost uniformly, you see police in every corner of the earth upholding property and whiteness on some level, even in places where this seems incredibly counter-intuitive.

D-7: At first, were new police members recruited from common labourers?

Adam: Yes, historically, police officers have been drawn from the working classes, and if we continue on the comparison with slave overseers, we can see that very often these overseers, managers or state agents are taken from the oppressed classes and elevated, giving them certain privileges. This has been a consistent tactic of ruling classes throughout both feudalism and capitalism to establish and maintain order by affording certain privileges to people from oppressed classes,

in exchange for their loyalty. The police is perhaps one of the most salient and consistent examples of this: they receive far more privileges in relation to pay and pensions and other conditions, compared to people who join the military, for instance.

Geo: The question raises an interesting historical piece, particularly in the US, and relates to contemporary debates around whether the police are workers and whether we should organise them as workers. These arguments are out there. Cedric Johnson in particular has been arguing that we should understand the police as part of this broader working class. Many others on the left, quite rightly see that as a kind of farcical misunderstanding of the way the police operate in practice. But it's got a history, right, which is that US police were drawn from largely poor and working class communities, mostly recent immigrant communities.

In 1919-1920 in the US, police went on strike, and then there's a process whereby those in power are trying to decide: how do we manage this slightly unruly Achilles heel? One thing that's worth understanding is that becoming the police is part of becoming white in US history, because that means being incorporated into the power-structure to oppress, police, and oversee others. It's also part of becoming so-called middle class. There were real efforts by police to function as a unionised labour force willing to withhold their own labour, which was contradictory from the beginning. This is because police were simultaneously breaking strikes across the country, being used as a force to destroy other workers and movements. Yet, there was a revolt among police against their managers, against municipal officials, but it was a short-lived moment, and the result was that police were fully incorporated into the power-structure through a series of privileges.

They threatened to be a labour movement, and as a result were given all the benefits and privileges the system had to give them to prevent them from being a labour movement. So the police mobilised the threat of becoming labour to gain power between the 1920s and the 40s. In the period following that, they mobilised the threat of black resistance and rebellion as a way to solidify their position,

that is, they would say: listen, who is going to keep you safe from the black power movement and riots and rebellions that were breaking out in the mid 1960s? All of that contributes to this consolidation of the police as an essential part of a corporatist relationship with the state.

We know corporatism as a quasi-fascistic phenomenon where all of these pieces of government are incorporated into one broader structure and the police are the glue of that. In the US in particular, they can't go on strike; technically, they've sacrificed their rights as a short-lived labour movement to be enforcers of the status quo. As a compensation for that, they get essentially anything they want when it comes to negotiation with local municipal officials, and they still to this day act like blackmailers and bullies when it comes to these negotiations. Here you see the real difference because, as an employment mode, policing has diverged so radically from the labour movement: the wages and salaries have gone up consistently, they've got all these privileges, they're essentially allowed to kill other workers with impunity,⁴ and yet the labour movement itself has declined, wages have stagnated, and these things take very different trajectories from the 1940s onward.

D-7: While structurally the police are not a corporation, strictly speaking, a careful study of Australian Federal Police's website reveals a rhetoric that mimics business vernacular: inclusive culture, incentives for personal growth, pursuit of integrity and, naturally, friendly environment. The police presence has been expanding in Australia, and the new Melbourne CBD headquarters cost \$650M! With this in mind, the abolitionist politics appear particularly hard to communicate. Are the police and, relatedly, prisons obsolete today?

Adam: When Angela Davis wrote *Are Prisons Obsolete?*,⁵ I don't think she meant that we can close every prison tomorrow and sack every cop today and everything will immediately get a lot better. What she was actually saying is: look, we don't need police in prisons in order to be safe, what we really need, if we want to create a safe and healthy society, is erode, get rid of and replace the structures of power

and inequality and oppression, which lead to people harming others. So when Angela Davis says, prisons are obsolete, what she means is that it is possible for us to create a society which is based on care, rather than competition. A society which is based on mutual aid and solidarity, rather than growth, extraction and the profit motive. Additionally if we can begin to unlearn the forms of heteropatriarchy and racial hierarchy which make these forms of violence and exploitation possible, then we can create a world in which prisons are obsolete. But, unfortunately, it takes a very long time, a lot of work and a huge amount of organisation in order for us to be able to create a world, in which prisons are obsolete. Therefore, what she and other pioneers of abolitionist thinking propose, is that we instead start to build the kinds of alternatives to police and prisons that we can rely on today, that can erode our society's reliance on the police and prison system.

Geo: I think the idea of obsolescence operates as a kind of guide to action for someone like Angela Davis. How is it that we make police and prisons obsolete? This in and of itself is a reframing away from the simple tearing down, to the question of the building up. This global question acquires a certain salience in history from which – for better or worse – a lot of the abolitionist movement get its frames of reference. To give the briefest of overviews, W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) is an essential text, and it tells the story of the US Civil War, a story of black revolt against enslavement and of the ways enslaved Africans took history into their own hands and transformed it, changing the outcome and the meaning of the war. It was not Abraham Lincoln who decided to free American slaves – they freed themselves through their struggle.

However, this near-abolition of slavery in the letter of the law – and I say “near-abolition” because there's a massive loophole in the 13th Amendment for those convicted of crimes – was not matched by a process of social reconstruction. In fact, we refer to the period after the civil war as Reconstruction, but it was a period of intense struggle and massive opportunity – the closest the United States has ever been to multiracial democracy – that was ultimately destroyed by white terrorism. By the mid to late 1870s, Reconstruction was dismantled, and

so ultimately what the United States gets is abolition without reconstruction, the elimination of one institution (for the most part, slavery) without rebuilding society in a way that would make that institution obsolete. In other words, the way the social structure called new forms of slavery into being, whether it's sharecropping or the criminalisation of blackness through black codes, leading then to convict leasing, in which many people who had been formally freed, were arrested, convicted and leased out as quasi-slaves to their previous plantation owners and masters. If you don't rebuild society on different foundations, the same old institutions will continue to develop.

You could look at this very concretely today by saying: if we could with the snap of a finger and the stroke of a pen eliminate police tomorrow, there would be new kinds of police on the next day, because we have a world built around white supremacist fear, property inequalities, patriarchal violence, and there is a need for institutions to uphold these things. Rich people will hire police and people to protect their wealth. I don't think this means that we slow the pace of our demands. For me, Minneapolis was a great example of the opportunity and the possibility to tear the institution down very quickly through both popular action and municipal action. Those are opportunities that we should take and we should then build that new society around it, as people did on the ground: more than a thousand people establishing a liberated zone in the centre of Minneapolis, and building up those alternative institutions. This is the double work that we need to be doing in the present, and moving forward.

D-7: In the Australian context, I just can't see how we can create conditions that would enable us, collectively, to convert competition into care without the collapse of the current regime and economy, feeding off the habitual exploitation of the land by corporations and colonists. It's hard to imagine how at a personal level people would start thinking differently about organising themselves into societies of mutual care, rather than societies that are driven almost exclusively by personal interests and the comfort of their kin.

Adam: Although I can't speak for the Australian context, Britain is also a fairly neoliberal place, certainly by many accounts the most neoliberal economy in western Europe. However, I think there are still pockets of resistance which counter dominant neoliberal ideas, which extend networks of mutual aid and solidaristic support. Examples of such principles include the National Health Service, the idea that healthcare should be free as the point of access. We go to work, we should be taxed, and that tax should be redistributed for things like health care. It's a basic principle that we should care for each other within our society. We want to make social investments and live in a better society, where there are things like free healthcare, secondary education, subsidised transport, and things like that.

Crucially, we should also consider wider forms of care existing within many communities across places like Britain and Europe – and I'm sure even in Australia – where people engage in forms of mutual aid which is community-led. When people organise to help others in their local area, who might have forms of disability or mental health problems, who might not be part of their family, but their wider community. There are youth clubs all over cities like London and Birmingham and Manchester, where people work for very low wages to support young people in their local area to try to help them in relation to issues that might be linked to harm or violence or some other things, in which the police would otherwise be involved. Many people, who probably go to good universities and get good degrees and could become management consultants with lots of money, instead decide to go and work for a local community organisation, such as a domestic violence shelter. This shows that a lot of people would much rather do a job which doesn't involve maximising their income, being involved instead with helping other people not simply because they might have solidarity with them, but because there might be something which gives people an intrinsic sense of hope about the world when they wake up in the morning, or when they get home from work at night. Probably this wouldn't happen, had they ended up working for McKinsey or an investment bank or a hedge fund or a job in which their sole

purpose is profit maximisation.

Geo: We live in a world that I describe as a “world of police.”⁶ The world has been built around policing, around capitalism and white supremacy. It took capitalism a long time to build this world of individual interest, it was not a natural phenomenon, it’s not anchored in mythical understanding of human nature, and so it’s something that can be unbuilt and rebuilt in different ways, starting with the micro-understanding of the things that we already know when it comes to policing and these broader questions about care for one another. Which is to say that we don’t call the police on our family very often, right? If we have conflicts, we deescalate them, we have conversations, we look at one another as objects of care and as providers of care for ourselves. When we need it, we’re capable of asking strangers for help, or giving help when strangers need it. We’ve got these micro-understandings of what care should look like.

You can spend a great deal of time, depending on where you live, without encountering or calling or interacting with the police, and yet for whatever reason, we think as if they’re always there, we think that we always need them to be there. So making that leap is a very difficult one, and it’s a leap in terms of our imaginary horizon of possibility, but it’s also a material leap. The good thing is that when people do make these decisions – “I’m not going to work solely for individual profit, I’m going to work for something that will have a social benefit” – they’re putting themselves automatically into a space in which different alternatives might be visible. In so far as we can begin to make those alternatives more abolitionist, more radical, we’ve got the possibility of learning your way out of the policing and massive incarceration apparatus.

D-7: Let me use an Australian example exposing the local culture of policing. Introduced in the 1980s, *Neighbourhood Watch* is a community safety strategy, which conveys a simple message, illustrated on this ubiquitous road sign:



Should you take notice of any suspicious activity, as a conscientious citizen, make sure you let the police now! The issue is: what counts as a suspicious activity? Obviously, it is not limited to things like burglary or running a fentanyl lab, but literally anything that violates current norms and regulations. In philosophical criminology, crime is a notoriously elusive concept.⁷ I've heard many stories about neighbours reporting on one another because, say, their shed extension was not compliant with the council's regulations, or because their cat was outside of the house.

Geo: It's an absolute internalisation of the cop inside your head.

D-7: Such examples mark a collapse of social trust. Some examples are absurd to the point of hysterical laughter. Once I had Michael Balderstone on my erstwhile radio show. He's the unofficial mayor of Nimbin, the Australian anarchist hub, and one of the founders of the Legalise Cannabis Party. He told us about a case, which exploded in the local paper: two police officers paid a visit to a Nimbin resident and spotted a pot with a marijuana plant soaking the sun on the porch. Reportedly, one of them said, "don't worry about it – everyone smokes dope here," and their partner dobbed them in for that incompetence!

Geo: I make a particular effort to insist that we're not abolishing the police to

replace them with nothing. I don't think anyone believes that, although it's a rhetorical tendency within certain anarchist segments of the abolitionist community, built on an understanding that if we simply withdraw the police as an oppressive force, the community is prepared to govern itself. That's a conceptual philosophical and practical misunderstanding. Also it's a political non-starter.

I live in West Philadelphia, and if you speak to your neighbours about what would happen if the police were removed, they will laugh you out of the room. At the same time, I'm for the immediate withdrawal of the police. In the context in which we're constructing different alternatives for community protection that raises an incredibly complex difficulty. How does that new structure differ from the police on the one hand, but also how does it differ from the history of para-policing, like community watch programs in the US, on the one hand. Parapolicing being that they work directly with the police and in conjunction with the police, but the reason that they do so is because they also uphold whiteness and class privilege to the same degree. Neighbourhood watch has almost always been a middle-class policing of the community, to keep an eye out for undesirables that need to be then excluded. It's a permanent threat to community self-protection, which is how you prevent your community patrols, or whatever you've got in the absence of police, from reproducing this tendency.

There are good examples of inclusive, multi-racial and multi-class, self-defence community patrols. This was happening in Minneapolis. When the police were driven out of the city of Minneapolis, multi-racial patrols were going around and preventing certain kinds of harm from being perpetrated by young people, encouraging them not to burn community centres and spaces, encouraging them to go home, bringing them to their parents instead of bringing them to the police. These are very small examples of a complete opposition between a community watch logic and a real community self-defence logic.

Some say we want the police to be as integrated into communities as possible, we want them to be part of the communities, but what community policing has

always meant is fragmenting the power of the community, sapping that power, attempting to infiltrate it, break it up, turn people against each other, and create snitches. Ultimately, if in theory you push that far enough, what happens is that the police become community members. But here's the difference: the defining feature of the police for me is that it's a professional force from outside the community that stands above the community and against it. Insofar as we, as a community, are getting together and making more or less democratic decisions (ideally more democratic) about how to take care of one another, the question is not a formal question – are we to wear uniforms? do we call ourselves police? do we use the means of violence or practices that might be understood as coercive or violent? – the question is who is doing it and how?

Adam: While we do have the cop in our head who's telling us to snitch, we also do have a set of moral faculties that can tell us when something isn't right. Be it the police doing something wrong or anybody else. The voice may tell us, maybe this set of institutions aren't keeping us as safe because otherwise I wouldn't be living in the US, with the biggest prison system in the world, and the highest levels of violence in the overdeveloped world.

D-7: Thank you. There is a key correlation between the origins of policing and the protection of the property of privileged classes. To what degree the prominence of the police in our societies depends on embracing private property as a foundational norm regulating our daily lives and relations with one another?

Adam: I might talk about Great Britain but I think it's applicable in other places. We see the rise of policing as a crucial electoral tool in Britain by both major political parties. This process begins in the 1970s of the Labour Party, but Margaret Thatcher took it to a new level, where it became the top three election issue, above wages and housing. This comes alongside another project by Margaret Thatcher, a project which she called "the right to buy." In the 1970s in Britain, huge numbers of people lived in public housing blocks – it was seen highly respectable and paid for by the taxpayer. Public housing had plumbing, electricity, communal green

spaces, and was considered architecturally modern and progressive.

D-7: I must add that today in Australia, in contrast to Austria,⁸ Commission Houses – homes to refugees, the poor, and many of my friends – are not only ugly and scarce, but also are deemed contemptible by the public.

Adam: Right, Thatcher said, look: I'm going to enable you to buy public housing property for a very cheap rate so you can become a property owner. So what she was doing here was simultaneously escalating the power of the police and the fear of crime, particularly so-called immigrant crime, while also trying to create a nation of property owners even among the working classes. Often these two sets of policies are thought about quite separately, but we could think about them as serving mutually beneficial purposes for the Thatcher government's neoliberal project. On the one hand, you're escalating the fear of criminality – from so-called immigrants, particularly black communities – while at the same time creating a class of people who are now more likely to be concerned about their loss of property or about securing their property, understanding their home as not something which is owned collectively through public ownership, but something which is personal to them and their own family. The more the state is able to create a relationship with property which is personal, rather than collective, the greater they can create a reliance (or a perceived reliance) on the police and prison systems.

We can think about that in other parts of the world, particularly the United States, where there's very little public housing and, therefore, a greater focus on private property, which means that more people want private property and, therefore, need it to be protected. Therefore, the more we can collectivise things like housing and other kinds of public spaces, the more people will think about them in a collective manner, leading to a collective responsibility to look after them, rather than it being someone's personal property, which requires them to rely on a police force due to fear of it being taken away from them by another individual through theft or other means.

Geo: It's really interesting because it resonates with long-term patterns of colonisation. An explicit project of how indigenous communities were destroyed across the Americas was to turn indigenous people into peasants in Latin America, or the whitening and displacement process – the theft of children – in the United States. It also raises a bigger question of how the economic fits with the racial, and this construction of individual subjectivity is crucial and hits its crisis points during the 2008 housing crisis. Prior to that, there are all these junk loans being given primarily to communities of colour, which then they default and lose their homes, while huge amounts of money are sucked out of those very same communities. Of course, the profit had already been made by the banks, and so there's no loss to the system.

It also concerns the debates about the term “prison industrial complex.” As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues,⁹ there's an implication that the economic question is solely about profit, about how prisons generate profit for private producers through so-called prison slavery. Part of her concern is that this is a narrow understanding of the economic because part of what's happening here is that entire countries and social structures are being reoriented and restructured. Mass incarceration was a geographical solution to an economic problem that involved not the withdrawal, but dramatic infusion of state money from the 50s and 60s into underdeveloped white areas of the U.S. in a way that creates its own constituency – creates its own economic motive and rationale in that prisons then provide jobs. It's a different side of the economic piece, which is not the profit question, but the employment and income question. While the state becomes racialised, handing out money to “undeserving” communities of colour, private capital and individualism become hyper-racialised as white. It's a way in which the two pieces operate hand in hand to incredibly destructive extremes.

D-7: The title of a private prison operator – Corrections Corporation of America – attests to this socio-political disaster.¹⁰ As we've demonstrated, racism constitutes part and parcel of policing – and, therefore, of police education.¹¹ A series of excruciating news recently emerged in the media. In Queensland, some officers

were recorded making obscene racist remarks and then, naturally, covered up.¹² In Victoria, the police have a training manual, which says that The Stolen Generations – an Australian rendition of fascist eugenics – is “the best thing that happened to them,” that is, Australian Aboriginals, representing the oldest surviving cultures on the face of the earth. As a result of negotiations between the enraged indigenous communities and the police, the latter have apologised and introduced a cultural sensitivity module, which runs for 3.5 hours.¹³

Still, a common citizen would perceive the police as a legitimate force against criminal activities, ranging from drug industries and domestic violence, to child pornography and serial killers. How can we envisage our communities emptied of the police units when we have to deal with such problems everyday?

Adam: The example of drugs is a useful one, partly because there are lots of real world examples of how drugs have been dealt with. One of the best examples is probably Portugal, but there are others as well. Portugal has relatively recently decriminalised all drugs regardless of what it might be, or how we perceive the effects that they have on our minds and bodies. They treat drug use as a public health issue, rather than a criminal justice issue, and this has led to a massive decrease in the harm and violence, which often takes place when drug use or distribution becomes a criminalised activity. People are able to have their drugs tested to see if they’ve been mixed with anything harmful; they can get clean needles to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and other forms of harm. There are mountains of evidence which prove pretty much without exception that the decriminalisation of drugs is better for everyone: it’s better for the drug user, it’s better for people who sell drugs in order for them to gain an income, but it’s also better for the rest of society as well. This is one way in which we can think about drugs, which of course is one of the key justifications for expansions in police, and it’s also one of the key reasons that people are incarcerated, particularly in countries like Britain and the United States.

Geo: Of course, decriminalisation is massively important. Prohibition in the U.S

has been so destructive, in terms of the transnational drug trade in the Americas, because over the course of 60 years border enforcement has led to major increases in the death count. In the past 30 years, we've seen something on the order of half a million dead in the so-called war on the cartels in Mexico, in which governments have tried to crack down on drug trafficking knowing at every step that it won't work. For example, when Reagan shuts down Miami as an entry point for drug flights directly from Colombia, those drugs will then transit through land routes in Mexico, which have created unprecedented levels of carnage. There's no way to stop the growth and the power of Mexican cartels, if that's our goal, without decriminalising and reconsidering the ways that the border is enforced. It's criminalisation in conjunction with the border that creates the massive profit potential of the drug trade: it is the border that makes these drugs worth what they're worth. Clear examples of small-level decriminalisation of marijuana in the United States leads to a collapse in the price, as well as the fact that many Mexican cartels, which hadn't already abandoned marijuana immediately, would cease to produce it and start to produce other things that are more profitable – more profitable because they're easy to smuggle across the border.

This raises an important point, which is that police abolition is also border abolition. This is a big project, a project that we need to understand. Border enforcement emerged in a sharp way in the mid-90s under the Clintonite turn of the Democratic Party. At the same time, we saw mass incarceration bills and the criminalisation of young black people as so-called “super predators,” in the same way as the border and police are both presented as solutions to the problems that they themselves create, by restructuring how our lives work, by injecting violence into communities – and then claiming they're the only things that can stop that violence. The violence of the border that we see in the American press would not exist if the border went back even to what it used to be 100 years ago: a line in the sand that people crossed all the time. It's only when you enforce the border that the value of crossing that border increases, exponentially.

In terms of the other pieces that you have brought in, it's important to point to

the extreme narratives that are used to justify policing, like sexual assault and domestic violence, and about what is to be done with people who are absolutely evil, like serial killers? Do you not imprison them? On the one hand, these arguments are a ruse, a bad faith attempt to justify systems because we know, for example, that policing does almost nothing to stop domestic violence. If anything, you know that huge numbers of police are themselves domestic abusers, inflicting more violence on women than they prevent.

D-7: Indeed, even the works of popular culture – e.g. *Unbelievable* (2019) – draw from journalistic research spotlighting domestic violence perpetrated by cops. We are not in a position to determine the actual numbers with a high degree of precision, alas, owing to the lawless subculture of whitewashing, but various sources suggest that the police and prison officers violate their own family members, physically and psychologically, at the rates substantially exceeding the general population – and get away with it.¹⁴ If that’s how some police and correction officers feel and act toward their own flesh and blood, one is aghast at imagining how the same people may feel toward alleged offenders.

Geo: We need to craft our understanding of abolition around a political narrative that really addresses these questions. In the medium term, we don’t know what these things look like, we don’t know how many people need to be ostracised, held, or surveilled in the short term, as we rebuild a society that we want to have. What we do know is that it’s not the vast majority of the people in prison. Up to 2 million people have been imprisoned at any given moment in the US, and the vast majority of so-called violent offenders had engaged in crimes they would never commit again, reflecting the outgrowth of a lifestyle and economic opportunities that were given to them. So, with regard to the extreme cases that justify policing and incarceration, we’re talking about dramatically shrinking the prison population and the presence of police on our streets, to then be able to think in a more clear-headed way about what our communities need in terms of protection. In the present, we’ve got this massive lie that says we need more police as our society is getting more violent, and it doesn’t ask why, with all the

growth in policing that's happened over the past 40 years, society is still not as safe as we would want it to be?

D-7: We can now move toward the concluding phase of our discussion. First, what would you propose to the members of a community sensing a nascent doubt about the role of police and the carceral system in their lives?

Adam: There's a great organisation in the U.S. who often get people to do a quick thought exercise: they ask participants to close their eyes and think about the most secure, relaxed and safe place that they've ever been to. Then, they ask everyone to open their eyes and say: what did you, guys, see? I was at my grandparents house, says someone; I was in my local church; I was with my friends at the beach; and so on. Then they say: okay, so who had cops and prisons in their safe, comfortable place? Generally, no one says "me," right? So, when we think about the safest places to be in, are they the communities that have cops in every corner, where people live under the greatest threat of imprisonment? Or are they the communities where most people have a relatively decent paying job, where they have access to education, if they want it, and where they have access to health care, including mental health support, where they have secure housing? And the answer is generally "yes" – they are the fundamental things that we need to live a dignified existence. We can see that what we need to live safely aren't cops in every corner, and living under the constant threat of imprisonment.

So, practically, how can we build those things around us? We can build more jobs, or strengthen our unions to help secure people's jobs and improve their pay and conditions. What about mental health? There are community mental health institutions that need support, and if there aren't – how can we build them and make them robust? What other things help with our mental health? Green spaces, youth clubs, music, arts and culture, supporting people who need child care – all of these things can improve our mental health. So, there are lots of ways in which people are already doing work, which erode society's reliance on the police and prison systems, because they are helping people to improve their mental

and emotional well-being. These are some of the examples of the community-led infrastructure, which can improve their likelihood of having a secure, stable and meaningful set of employment conditions, access to housing, healthcare, and well-being. It's about seeing what kind of work is already out there and being connected up to a wider project, which provides community-led forms of safety and care, but also to a wider vision that works towards making police and prisons, as we said at the top of this conversation, obsolete.

Geo: Absolutely. Abolition and reconstruction – the tearing down and the building up – are always happening in some ways in the form of community alternatives. In the US, we have many examples of community organisations that directly intervene to prevent violence, to deescalate and mediate conflicts, and these are the projects that need to be dramatically ramped up. At the same time, there's a question of working to tear down repressive and carceral institutions, which is something that's more periodic – you have waves of rebellion and resistance that give us opportunities to strike blows against these institutions. In 2020, particularly, the mass rebellions presented a golden opportunity to make some headway. The question is how do you do both of these things at once? How do you contribute to both of these tasks, even though everyone's going to be working in a different capacity?

It's important to emphasise, on the one hand, the distinction between “reformist reforms” and potentially abolitionist reforms, because we're not in a position where we can wait for the total and sudden abolition of these institutions. We need to talk about how to weaken them, and we need to be very careful because all of the reforms that the system offers uphold and even strengthen policing. Whether it's new technological questions, body cameras, whether it's training, which infuses huge amounts of money into police, whether it's more police, whether it's community policing. All these things are strengthening the police, giving them more resources, giving them more legitimacy. However, there are reforms that can point in a different direction, that withdraw police from communities, that reduce their funding, that curtail their powers in their impunity, and these are the

changes that we can support.

Here you've got a bridge in between in the form of defunding the police, which allows us to mobilise around the reduction of police budgets. We can then point to that defunding and say: listen, your lives have not gotten more dangerous as a result of these millions of dollars that have been withdrawn from the police budget, but the real key is that those resources are then being reinvested into community alternatives to policing, providing the opportunity for people to see on a local level how their lives have actually gotten better – not only safer, but also more community oriented. There's a sense that you've got someone else to call, the sense that you've got someone in your neighbourhood – a cohesion and community fabric that makes the police obsolete, less present, less relevant.

D-7: Finally, in the context of this special issue of *Parrhesia*, it's essential to point out that both of you take great risks by challenging the very power that authorities deploy to maintain the status quo. It's not another speculative struggle. May I ask you a personal question: for those willing to follow your steps, could you please share what keeps you going?

Adam: For me, even if certain institutions disagree with the political project we've been discussing today, there are many more ordinary people for whom these arguments resonate strongly. When I teach courses on activism or anti-racism, they are extremely popular among students, and the conversations we have in the classroom are a daily reminder of why working in education is so important to me. But of course, outside of academia, working with campaign groups, activists, and community organisations, also keeps me going a great deal. This isn't necessarily because I can see my educational work having a direct effect, but more because it is a powerful reminder that this work is part of a movement far bigger than myself or my individual research work.

Geo: Increasingly, I take solace in the long-term view, in stepping back and gauging just how much has shifted over even the past 30 years, and in seeing that at the

heart of all this change is mass struggle. So while I find inspiration in the young people who took to the streets in 2020 or occupied campuses to stand with Gaza and Palestinian liberation, I also take every opportunity to remind younger people that – even if it might seem like carceral power is unchanging – so much change has been set into motion even in our lifetimes. Ursula Le Guin once emphasised that while the power of capitalism seems eternal and inescapable, “so did the divine right of kings.” The same goes for the police.

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D-7 is a member of *mongrel matter* and stands for seven dimensions.

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**postthought: parrhesia
graphomania scenius**

valery vino

INTRODUCTION

In the ante-mortem series of lectures, our contemporary Michel Foucault excavates a vital cultural matter. The philosopher canvasses diverse critical exercises as possible stepping stones to an occasion of “truth-telling.” The classic authors called this aptitude and right – *parrhesia*, an apposite problem for any age. Touching on personal and public, political and cosmic spheres, Foucault’s account considers *fearless speech* in the context of human affairs, the building blocks of handmade cultures.

To iterate Foucault once more, where and how can one learn to become the person “who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth” in a given situation, and is willing to accept the consequences?¹ This special volume of *Parrhesia* aims to drum up interest in this credo in relation to philosophical and journalistic practices, with particular regard to corresponding critical education.

Parrhesiastic activities, risks, and characters vary and transform according to their context.² For example, a resolute commitment to an academic milieu is likely to fashion a manner of inquiry different to one triggered by a military milieu. The biographies of Plato and Xenophon, Derrida and Montaigne, as well as of several XXth century *parrhesiastes* like Frantz Fanon and bell hooks, Simone Weil and Albert Camus, to name a few, suggest that fluctuating occupations and lifestyles influence one’s scholarly concerns, and vice versa. Extending to nomadism, existential mobility mobilises one’s skills: stylistic, thematic, methodological, and various nano-factors are all susceptible to situational modifications, shaping a writer’s worldview, as an artist, guide, and a teller of difficult truths.

Philosophers are remembered for the problems they pose, the questions they ask, for emancipating thought and heart, thereby making us see further than our noses. As a discipline and occupation, journalism is considerably younger than philosophy. Nevertheless, many journalists work in a similar vein, researching and exposing veridical facts, patterns of error and injustice. In an effort to correct dominant views and public awareness, countless philosophers and journalists suffered harassment and persecution. There is nothing surprising about this: both camps take pride in nourishing skilful analysts and story-tellers, assuring us their aim is to convey the truth.

Even so, traditional approaches to philosophical education today are fairly questionable, making one’s body a passive recipient of abstract knowledge, while overlooking vital areas like wilderness and community. With little hands-on, participatory inquiry and experience, mainstream school and tertiary studies

thus tend to be out of touch with the issues cropping up in everyday culture, particularly at the grassroots levels where practical knowledges abound. The thing is, philosophy only recently emerged as a chiefly academic, professional enterprise. Comparatively, many prominent figures in the past practiced philosophy in courts and caves, cemeteries and temples, in market-spaces and mountain tops, on a tightrope, in solitude and community – all marking philosophical life in the plurality of its aptness. In this web, we find a string of surviving pragmatic creeds testing the epistemic groundwork for scientific and social change, from which for our purposes we pick these two. First, John Dewey, elegantly:

If ideas, meanings, conceptions, notions, theories, systems are instrumental to an active reorganization of the given environment, to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of their validity and value lies in accomplishing this work. If they succeed in their office, they are reliable, sound, valid, good, true. If they fail to clear up confusion, uncertainty and evil when they are acted upon, then they are false.³

On one hand, the motive that drives Dewey is inspiring: each project's truthfulness lies in its potency to transform things, as a tool that draws us away from errors and harm that entail suffering for no good reason. On the other hand, this formulation overlooks at least one substantial material obstacle: "reorganisation" in question tends to challenge the ruling order of things, in one's family or society, that may in their turn fight against the change. Does a solo struggle, in the form of disobedience or research, have a meaningful future today? Relatedly, the second cautionary statement, as above, so below, is by Fred Moten in conversation, unreserved:

... look: the problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize

that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?⁴

Acted upon in a period of time (2021-2025) defined by aggravating cosmopolitical, health, educational, and environmental crises, the intuition that drives the creation of this special volume is that a coalition – “scenius” – of journalists and philosophers can reinvigorate and transform the currently disjointed and yet kindred forms of *parrhesiastic* labour.

In a paper published more than thirty years ago, Kenneth Goodman made a prescient remark:

If philosophy is to be counted an important or even a fundamental activity, then it is a little mysterious why there is so little of a philosophical nature in a popular press that pays lip service, at least, to completeness in chronicling human affairs.⁵

To be fair, in recent years some scholars have been pitching their research to avenues like The New York Times and The Guardian, but such short pieces tailored for wide readership and taste can barely qualify to belong to a philosophical journalism or journalistic philosophy. The absence of a hybrid vanguard genre, and of common influential outlets, seems particularly bizarre when we consider new journalism (which is no longer new), and its successful wedding (since the 1970's) of journalistic with literary techniques.⁶ If journalism and literature are not only compatible, but also illuminating, and furthermore, if literature has been congruous with philosophy ever since Plato's *Dialogues*,⁷ we may find ourselves, then, manoeuvring in methodological virgin lands.

When it comes to journalism studies, it tends to have little regard for the history of philosophy, its intellectual rigour, limits, and creativity. It is unlikely that today's industry-oriented journalistic training will become disadvantaged with the inclusion of bullet-proof philosophical questions – the surviving sources of striving for certainty and a better life. Admittedly, contemporary research in

journalism does display a tendency to draw from the sub-discipline of ethics, in the extensive field of media ethics – a cousin of sports and business ethics.⁸ However, this research trajectory is impotent to do justice to the power of philosophy and journalism dancing together toward a new hybrid field of inquiry. It is one thing to borrow from an array of normative and meta-theories to clarify the issues undermining the journalistic industry, in hope to ameliorate professional values and education. It is an entirely different thing to educate contemporary *parrhesiastes*. The fact that, in the wake of digital journalism, every single decent media publisher is dying to attract subscribers and donations, in resistance to biased control by media monopolists, suggests that in the current intellectual climate such mainly single-authored scholarship serves little purpose but the naive proliferation of academic knowledge and self-promotion, in the place of a radical educational reorientation.⁹

With a few exceptions, there is nowhere to learn about the dialogue between philosophy and journalism, since journalists and philosophers have no arena to share. This omission is both disturbing and intriguing, emblematic of a lack of research, theory and practice, rather than a rivalry. The scarcity of scholarship and praxis dedicated to the intersections between journalism and philosophy implies that to date we know very little about the prerequisites and paradigms of truth-telling generated by the two forms of *parrhesiastic* inquiry carefully paired and tested. And so our collaborative volume is dedicated to a new audience and a range of theorists and detectives who do not give up on truth-telling, alert to crisp truths yet to be uncovered, in spite of the toxic air of twisted facts and vomit news on repeat.

DIMENSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY PARRHESIA

We are now going to review the ambit of *parrhesia* delimited by the authors of this volume, each offering surprisingly different angles, bearing witness to the riches beneath *the courage of truth*. The volume's tone is set in motion in an opening essay by John M. Carvalho, who attended the '83 Foucault seminars at the University of

California in Berkeley. Professor Carvalho situates his analysis in the dominant epistemological context of “post-truth-politics.” Marketed by the “deployment of social media to accelerate the speed and expand the range of circulation,” “post-truth dissimulation advances on that strategy by declaring what is manifestly false to be true and doubling-down on those fabrications to smother all claims to the contrary.” The omni-presence of post-truth rhetoric is a real threat to the viability of common sense, paving a way to fascism and other atrocities. For instance, the führer of capitalist extremism, shutting down his critics on X, Elon Musk consistently sells the media-Leviathan as a medium that promotes free speech. His boss and beneficiary, president Trump, after a diplomatic fight with Vl. Zelensky in the White House, now freely refers to Ukraine as the catalyst of the war *against* Russia. One educated way out of such blunt and harmful (self-) contradictions is in tandem with Foucault’s problematisation of *parrhesia* as a social practice. Carvalho focuses on “a philosophical *parrhesia* found in the figure of Socrates,” unthinkable without the practice of “*epimeleia heautou* or care of oneself.” On this foundational view, *parrhesia* is learned in a dialogue with neither a colleague nor a buddy nor oneself, but a friend as a means to self-formation, building up to a set of skills the Ancient Greeks called “self-control (*sôphrosunê*).” In the absence of temperance and enduring friendships, so the story goes, one is doomed to fail to guide others. Hinging on the bond of reciprocal love, a shared passion as a treasure, friendship becomes the bedrock of social engagement, by way of trust: “Between friends all is common,” Protagoras helps us remember at eternity’s gate. It is then an antithesis to friendship that fosters a closed unit, like a self-centred figure of family, or a sect. Friendship is a pleasantly hard art to learn: when it comes to searching for truthful meanings together, we are to stage for one another a scene ascending to what we do not know. Conducive to this playful activity are (Socratic) irony and humility, found at cross-purposes with (Plato’s) winds of vanity.¹⁰ Since current searches for any difficult truths in the popular media wither away with the primacy of shamelessly self-serving/ refuting statements, Carvalho proposes to embrace the Cynic lineage of *parrhesia* in what Foucault calls “aesthetics of existence.” Specifically, Carvalho favours

staging “provocative dialogues and artefacts,” by friends, artists, journalists, and comedians alike, as “fragile achievements” seeping from “a life formed from affordances dishonestly depleted by post-truth politics.” This avant-garde form of *parrhesia* operates “beside the point of the mainstream” and does not “engage that mainstream dialectically.” Hence, its significance will be “felt by a minority of the population which has turned its back on the stupidity of post-truth for good reasons,” the author concludes.

Giving us a taste for the genre of philosophical journalism, the next three contributions enrich our understanding of the dimensions of contemporary *parrhesiastic* work.

What it means to aspire to fearlessness, and how today it is contaminated with antagonism, is an issue taken up by Christopher Schwartz, a philosopher who specialises in journalism without dismissing spirituality. Based on the premise that for Foucault, “the self and society are not static entities but are instead formed and sustained through power dynamics,” Schwartz contends that *parrhesia* is “characterised by a willingness to engage with, and challenge, societal norms and institutions while simultaneously being mindful of the potential consequences for both individuals and the collective.” To be efficacious, with respect to the speaker, the recipient, and the audience, an act of *parrhesia* must meet epistemological and ethical conditions, i.e. to be context-sensitive and compassionate. Thus, it is the responsibility of the *parrhesiast* that Schwartz emphasises. If they lack self-understanding and solidarity with the plights of the world, reminiscent of *sôphrosuné*, they will be prone to backslide into three kinds of “bad *parrhesia*”:

- i. *recklessness*, due to either being “unmindful” or uncaring “of the collective’s needs”
- ii. *deceit*, via manipulation, “prioritising *their* particular collective’s needs over and against all others,” as seen in the discourse of figures like Tucker Carlson
- iii. *injustice*, which fuels a kind of “tribalism” that severs “the world into

allies and enemies,” feeds off “a lack of reflection on the real power dynamics at play,” and ultimately is a backside of the lust for power

“The bad *parrhesiast*,” on this fluid view, “can speak truthfully yet ill-formed (reckless), ill-targeted (unjust), or in a manner manipulative of the audience’s biases (duplicitous), or some mix of these.” In agreement with Carvalho, Schwartz observes that “the United States’ media and political elites have immense algorithmic incentives to actively promote bad *parrhesia*,” asking “given that the system thrives on all this fearful screaming, what can be done”? In response, Schwartz offers four alternatives. Firstly, but also potentially problematically, one can refrain from being ideologically polarised and choose to remain fearlessly silent, either by not voicing their views, or by active resistance to the existing mechanisms of power, such as not having a voice in another farcical presidential marathon. While being silent has its place, it is also not clear whether such silence is always fearless or fearful, Schwartz noting, “what if withdrawing is what the bastards want”? Fearless listening is another option, and perhaps the bastards wouldn’t support this attitude as much, since it involves attentive and, preferably, discerning participation in a debate. In fact, an ability for listening coupled with fearless curiosity – Schwartz’s third alternative – breaks grounds necessary to a dialogue. Do we teach and learn these basic skills at schools? “Fearless curiosity is the conscious choice to ask sincere, tough, even potentially embarrassing questions,” and one excellent example of *parrhesiastic* curiosity is journalist Isobel Yeung cross-examining militant authorities about the backlash against women’s rights, in the documentary *Life in the Taliban’s Afghanistan* (VICE, 2022). Finally, while both Carvalho and Schwartz in the end borrow from the Cynics, they arrive at different conclusions. Carvalho’s *parrhesiast* shapeshifts into an aesthetic renegade, while Schwartz advocates for a spiritual transfiguration, that of “*irenic parrhesia*.” From this vantage point, it is desirable for the *parrhesiast* to be responsive to the mainstream while simultaneously remaining “open to other possibilities, including seeking [a space where] consensus and harmony [are possible].” Although not opposed to provocation, Schwartz nevertheless leans

toward a *parrhesia* characterised by “a spirit of good faith and respect for the humanity of the interlocutor.” Given the current toxicity levels, one would also add hugs, an eye for friendly humour, and forgiveness.

The above configurations of *parrhesia* are germane to societies where freedom of expression is not fanatically censored by the state. However, in the absence of appropriate education, despite all the liberties, free speech as a social right has a tendency to digress into empty opinions (*kenodoxia*) and wholesale oceans of lies. In this place of illusions, performances of *fearless speech* become dangerously scarce.

Since *parrhesiastic* praxis circles in and around socio-political contexts, we may learn a great deal about its modifications within an autocratic regime. To gauge *fearless speech* in a loosely democratic society still requires intellectual honesty and courage, whereas in dictatorial states *parrhesiastic* instincts instil anticipations of imminent payback, as freedom of expression is already under gunpoint. As an example of the seriousness of these contexts, a writer from Saint-Petersburg, Russia, and a candidate for a voice in this project, had to withdraw their participation for fear of consequences. It is, then, a blessing to have on the raft of this volume a piece that interrogates the political scene in Iran.

Situated in Mashhad, Majid Heidari poses a question: “how [do] autocratic states respond to acts of *parrhesia*”? Drawing from recent literature on *parrhesia* driven by Foucault (Dyrberg, Goodnight, Pernot), Heidari explores two forms of political *parrhesia* in his analytic reportage. The first “pertains to politicians critiquing the ruling majority,” and the second “involves citizens openly critiquing those in positions of power.” As examples of the first kind, Heidari considers two official letters, “Letter of the Ninety” (1990), authored by prominent activists, and “The Cup of Poison” (2003), written and signed by many members of the Iranian parliament. Both letters advocate for transparency and active solidarity with the ordeals of the everyman under the tight fist of the politico-religious dictatorship; both letters follow “the path of truth.” Still, everyone involved has been punished,

in one way or another, owing to the Supreme Leader's labelling these acts of dissent as "unjust," that is, aligning with pernicious Western capitalist values. Ironically, it is this sort of reasoning by sword and shield that Schwartz, a Western thinker, dubs unjust.

Directly preceding the Islamic Revolution, "Ten Nights of Goethe" (1977) is an example of the second kind of political *parrhesia*. Co-created by a squad of intellectuals and artists, in the sight of "thousands of cultural enthusiasts who sat in the rain," they demanded to support freedom of expression and dignity of artistic labour. Off the back of this event, the key participants were subjected to persecution, then either forced out of the country, or censored and imprisoned; the least submissive were put to death. In ominous circumstances human animals show what and who they stand for. Meanwhile, an activist and professor of Arts & Media, Heidari calls our attention to "pseudo-artists," and by extension pseudo-intellectuals:

... sycophantic, obsequious, servile, and submissive to the powerful ... opportunists who constantly appear in the media and festivals ... while being oppressive, tyrannical, self-satisfied, and arrogant towards the people.

Fortunately, the descendants of the Persian civilisation will never give up, anticipating "*kairos* ... the critical and decisive moment or opportunity." Heidari offers a final and recent example of political *parrhesia*, "The 14th Statement" (2019), bleeding for the "widespread violation of civil rights, especially women's rights" and "incompetence in leadership and proper governance of the country." The Islamic state conflated another collective act of *parrhesia* with an "act against national security," and dragged the participants and their supporters into exile and confinement. Finally, Heidari makes two observations leading to a great insight. Firstly, high officials and priests in effect encourage fierce criticisms of oppositional values, religions, and ways of life. This common strategy props up wantonness for power. Secondly, at the same time authorities are hostile to bold

criticisms exposing the miseries their lot brings about. It is in this maddening socio-political climate that we arrive at the conclusion, which applies to authoritarianism in general:

Consequently, one can deduce that an indicator of the effectiveness of *parrhesia* is when those in power instinctively deny the allegations and position themselves as victims. This defensive reaction serves as a clear signal that *parrhesia* has hit a nerve and presented a genuine challenge to the prevailing authority.

At another level, an existential distinction between courage and fortitude (which one can't grasp staring at a computer monitor) is divulged; in a personal message, Majid remarked that "I put my heart into that essay on *parrhesia* ... I had a blast working on it." Here is a lesson, and things are really warming up here.

Next door, polymath Joshua M. Hall telescopes all lenses upon Davi Kopenawa's experiences with whiteness as epidemic ontology. "[E]videnced by pathologically extreme appetites for death, destruction, and sickening," the Yanomani diplomat and elder sees our world running on fumes owing to spiritual amnesia. In an autobiography, *The Falling Sky*, the elder's *parrhesia* punctuates the symptoms of greediness emanating from urbanity – ecological doomsday and societal divisions, particularly in the context of intergenerational needs and objectives. Having survived the 1993 Haximu massacre, as a shaman, Kopenawa can sense and say things that may appear counter-intuitive, so long as one acknowledges surviving indigenous ontologies as fleshless entities. In Tungisic, "ša" in "šamān" stands for "to know." Accordingly, it is šamān's knowledges of the virtues found in endemic lifeforms that set the scene in this work. Hence, in preparation for his news, Hall takes us through the basic elements of Yanomani shamanism. To begin with, Yanomani healers "ingest a hallucinogenic substance, namely *yākoana* powder derived from the sap of local trees, to generate visions of "spirits" or *xapiri*, who:

... literally alter the shaman's body to render him capable of receiving and understanding their dancing messages. These spirits' dances are performed on shiny reflective surfaces (which Kopenawa calls "mirrors"), onto which the spirits descend, along gossamer-thin lines, from their palatial mansions in the skies. "As fine and translucent as spider webs or fishing lines," Kopenawa relates, "the xapiri's shining paths will become fixed along our arms and legs" (referring to the limbs of an experienced Yanomami shaman). "Then the spirits will come down along them to tear our chest and open a large clearing in it where they will do their presentation dance," Kopenawa concludes, the interpretation of which is the shaman's constant, lifelong occupation.

Please note that such knowledges of doctor-witches are criminalised and, as a consequence, policed in so-called civilised countries.¹¹ With respect to the lifeblood of Yanomami *parrhesiastic* praxis, Hall emphasises that it takes a form of the "gestural, non-verbal language of dance," and adds that for Kopenawa "the purpose of this spirit-dancing is a form of linguistic communication." "It is these spirits' words that I make heard," he shares, and "not just my own thought." In this ritual sphere, *xapiri* and shaman dance thought are one.

Further, in four statements, Kopenawa and Hall offer a counter-example of searches for wisdom of love. The first two touch the nerve of academicism and post-truth politics alike, while the second doublet of black *parrhesia* points to *graphomania*:

The path of their thought is often twisted and thorny.

They do not truly know the things of the forest.

They contemplate paper skins on which they have drawn their own words for hours.

If they do not follow their lines, their thought gets lost.

"They" – these figures of thought "descend from the Yanomami," which is not

to say they know the secrets of dancing, “being merely a lost, forgetful, and devastating once-Indigenous people.” By contrast, Kopenawa deploys his life-and-death artform to fight for land rights, where one of the more salient opponents is land-eating – a possessive attitude to the land, as though it was up to humans to own and butcher it. “What the white people call ‘minerals’,” he says, “are the fragments of the sky, moon, sun, and stars, which fell down at the beginning of time.” On this cosmogenic view, whiteness devours cosmos with us.

Let us conclude with a light step by Joshua, whose extensive research shows how poorly examined are the somaesthetic forces of dance in correlation with radical social change:

... entire being [of the *xapiri*], as well as their communications with the shamans, consists of elaborate dances, which Kopenawa compares to images in television, movies, photographs. This suggests that the spirit dances might be the figurative dances of lines and colours on surfaces of imagination, and thus potentially more accessible to white people.

As the adage goes, war can be sweet to those who have not tried it: the phenomenon lurking in the background of the preceding articles is addressed by the next two contributions. First, written in the background of escalating military conflicts around the world, we have Gwendalynn Roebke’s emphatic review of Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s *Against War* (2008), including a fresh interview with the manuscript’s author. Pursued along two axes, the stakes are high in this reflection. To start with, Roebke draws our attention to “the endless reality of violence present in our contemporary lives [which] can be traced through the living legacies of western modernity and coloniality,” cut from the same bloody cloth as whiteness. To be sure, war stands for “the reduction of the othered masses via coloniality, liberalism, capitalism, into combatants who qualified for extermination for the sole purpose that they stand in the empire’s way.” This self-assured way of life is very much alive and kicking in Canada and Australia (to take two examples) at the sacrifice of First Nations peoples who have been subjected to genocide and

mortifying material conditions at the hands of colonisers and colonists, intent to work⇨work⇨work, own land, flourish, and, in the end, to be happy. That is not new news, as per Maldonado-Torres: while “there is a qualitative transformation of the state of war, the core paradigm persists.” Namely, it is a cannibalistic ethic deployed by alpha-peoples, often openly monotheistic, and those who sing along thinking of themselves as being superior to – and, therefore, entitled to subjugate – others who resist to surrender to the premises, promises, and practices of Eurocentrism, or of any other mnemonic remains of geocentrism.

To switch axes, Roebke reminds us that “the key task in the book is not to muddle through a purely intellectual project that devises the perfect label for the atrocities that come from coloniality,” but to prepare the ground for “a call to action, a call for love, that stands to upend the colonial reality of normalised atrocity.” Specifically, Maldonado-Torres and Roebke focus on altericity, a radical rendition of Levinas’s fraternity, as “the intrinsic concern for the Other’s death.” To ascertain this form of intimate care, Roebke makes a distinction between the (loving) witness and the (silent) spectator. The latter silences by being silent, consuming “the violence being done to the colonised,” e.g. in media, while not “acknowledging the violent reality, as evident in their refusing to join in protest with the marginalised.” Materially invested in the status quo, the spectator is capable of functioning well in a dysfunctional world, even to the extent of pursuing “the ‘truth’ of the new reality of normalised brutality,” the “truth” emitted in a perpetual state of “necrotic peace.” One example of institutional spectatorship considered by Roebke is:

... the Western academies’ bureaucratic responses to the violence of settler colonial genocide unfolding in occupied Palestine and the pro-Palestinian liberation movements taking place across the world. At various institutions, Cornell, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania, etc., the dominant sentiment among those in the bureaucratic rungs of power is to stay silent on Palestine and vocally endorse the settler state of Israel, for fear of losing donor support and appearing “too extreme”. To this end, the

silence propagated at many of these academic institutions relies on a glib spectatorship that plays into dominant narratives that erase Palestinian aliveness and legitimacy.

As a cure to this metastasis, the meditation turns to “vocal witnesses” and the attitude of altericity by way of “a reverberance of the death and dying of the marginalised in one’s own flesh.” In a world where one cannot discern an end to war, one can still hear the cry of the othered, should you keep your ear to the ground. To conclude, Maldonado-Torres and Roebke call upon a practice reminiscent of the canonical teachings in all major theisms, and yet which paradoxically runs against the grain of the dominant order of things – “love entailed in altericity insists on a sort of ‘becoming’ the Other despite physical and epistemic distance.” Thus, one may discover a path “to boldly speak truth to power through love,” and to act, desperately, as the othered, dead and alive, are heard through ourselves.

“I have been a witness, and these pictures are my testimony. The events I have recorded should not be forgotten and must not be repeated,” remarks photojournalist James Nachtwey, cited in the next contribution by Michel-Antoine Xhignesse. Perhaps the most gifted analytic aesthete of my generation, Xhignesse zooms in on the journalistic practice of war photography, which he contrasts with the state propaganda that in principle bends the heinous truth beyond recognition. For Xhignesse, this demarcation hinges “on the ideal of objectivity to communicate the surreal horror of distant goings-on to audiences who are emotionally and geographically far removed from the everyday realities of war.” The paper questions whether war photography, backed up by intricate mechanical processes, “is a ‘transparent’ medium,” unlike a painting where the artist’s moods, beliefs, and intentions seem to be ineliminable. If a photographic representation of war is indeed transparent, one would be justified in likening this quality with that of “air, glass, or water.” Following that, Xhignesse walks us through a brief history of military photojournalism, from its propagandistic genesis to the contemporary codes of ethics, “governed by epistemic norms that aim for the accurate transmission of information by allowing us to see through

the photographic surface to the events which generated it.” Does this entail that war photography “is exclusively or even primarily an epistemic practice”? Astoundingly, Xhignesse argues that while war photographers chronicle “evidence of horrific events,” they are motivated:

... to convince us of some position (viz., that war is morally repugnant) and to spur us into action (viz., by opposing the war in question). In other words, war photography’s primary aims are *perlocutionary*. In this respect, war photography mirrors propaganda, whose aims are likewise perlocutionary. But where propaganda aims to persuade us *without* regard for the truth, war photography aims to persuade us *with* the truth.

It is both remarkable and unsurprising that the aesthetic and prefigurative effects of war photography are not acknowledged by the international codes of ethics, with the exception of Spain’s National Association of Graphic Press and Television Reporters. To elucidate “the shift from an epistemic to a perlocutionary practice,” thereby considerably advancing our understanding of military photojournalism, Xhignesse invites us to discern a difference between the war photograph’s object and subject. The object marks “the bodies and events depicted on the image’s surface,” and they “*represent*” its subject – “the war and its horror which, as an abstract and temporally-extended event, cannot be depicted in ways which will preserve real similarity relations.” Accordingly, works of war photography are “transparent with respect to their object, but not their subject,” the heaviest nihilistic meaning of which ought to elicit terror and aversion, like rape, motivating us to resist it. In Xhignesse’s eyes, the war photographer is a true *parrhesiast* who “risk[s] life, limb, and reputation to show us the consequences of what are often otherwise popular foreign policy interventions in distant lands,” that is to say, “to represent the carnage and misery to which she stands witness.”

To expose executive brokers in corporate politics, Stefanie Baumann uncoils another representational medium – *parrhesiastic* documentary, running afoul of “populist interests or profit orientation [which] inflict topical choices, formal

criteria, and formatting constraints.” While the latter, highly adaptable ideology of production “may be interesting, fascinating, enlightening, or entertaining ... it is not *parrhesiastic* in an emphatic sense.” As an example of *courage of truth* in documentary, Baumann invokes Laura Poitras’ *Citizenfour* (2014), in which infrastructure analyst Edward Snowden reveals “that the US government’s NSA programme,” chained up with “tech and other large corporations,” as well as Australian, British, and Canadian intelligence agencies, “had been secretly collecting metadata of citizens ... under the pretext of increased security needs.” A net of industrial espionage was cast on planetary scale, targeting not only common people, but also high-ranking merchants and politicians. To balance up the totalitarian theft, Ed Snowden took the stage, besieged in a hotel room in Hong-Kong, “I am more willing to risk imprisonment, or any other negative outcome personally, than I am willing to risk the containment of my intellectual freedom and that of those others around me whom I care for.” Like Julian Assange, Snowden emulates a “genuinely critical attitude, understood with Foucault as ‘the art of voluntary insubordination’ ... ‘of not being governed like that and at that cost’,” one comparable with the creed of a proto-anarchist Étienne de La Boétie.¹² “What exactly is the relation between the film and the notion of *parrhesia*?” asks Baumann. First, setting the seal on her 9/11 trilogy of documentary films, Poitras and her colleagues’ “involvement in the very act of making Snowden’s revelations public was undoubtedly crucial.” Moreover, released fifteen months after the materials blazoned to the press, the documentary accomplishes another two objectives. “*Citizenfour* aims to reach a broad audience of people who have all been betrayed by government initiatives – a community of peers,” not to mention that “it has drawn attention to the human aspect of the *parrhesiastic* act.” As the film unfolds, Snowden is turned from a handsome man with a high-paid government job to the enemy of the state, from looking mint to defaced. Shot in a plain manner with cliff-hangers, the documentary “shifts the focus from *parrhesia* as such to its conditions of possibility in times of digital surveillance.” The film team’s development of trust and coalescence is edifying.

In what follows, Baumann considers another two documentaries, René Vautier's anti-colonial *Afrique 50* (1950) and Jan Němec's *Oratorio for Prague* (1968). We entreat the reader to connect with these *parrhesiastic* monuments. Note that both filmmakers, similarly to the Iranian whistle-blowers discussed in Heidari's piece, suffered bitterly for their courage to film the truth, while their cinematic works "reveal the attempts of those in power to conceal the violent nature of their rule and the repression of the people in draconian ways." In closing, Baumann spotlights documentary as a subversive medium, in view of exposing "the mechanisms of oppression that perpetuate racial inequality, political and economic domination by imperialist powers," as well as provoking "the hegemony of dominant imagery that shapes our perception of reality." One counterexample is Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), displaying "neo-colonialist violence in Argentina and abroad through a montage of heterogeneous material, such as archival footage, political analysis, clandestinely recorded material, quotations of revolutionaries like Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Aimé Césaire." However, the essay concludes with a sobering reminder. As the wheel of disaster capitalism – and its shadow: religious narcissism – is turning with the strain, hardly anything, not even a televised genocide, is able to stir up sustained acts of great-souled dissent. Summing up, Baumann wonders, "how the audience's willingness to deal ethically with complicated truths can be aroused"? Perhaps that is one of the key problems steering Foucault's own classes, and to which this special volume is dedicated.

Our second-to-last contribution takes on a couple of superstructures symbiotic with the status quo – the police and the prison-industrial complex. In a dialogue, Adam Elliott-Cooper and Geo Maher discuss the origins and proportions of policing in the imperial contexts of Great Britain and the USA, mindful of their colonial domains. Concerning the UK, Elliott-Cooper traces the origin of police to the army and "the emergence of capitalism, coupled with empire playing a crucial role in policing oppressed people, whether they be the working classes of Europe, but also the colonised and enslaved subjects in places across the

Americas.” As Maher adds, the professional London model of police “acquired its militarised characteristics in places like Haiti, Nicaragua, and in the Philippines” – upon return, the police “were designed across the United States, doing so along military lines.” Elliott-Cooper contends that to maintain dominance, the ruling classes deploy a recurrent scheme, namely framing the service as a gateway to middle-class privileges. Typically, the stratum of police officers is recruited “from oppressed classes,” – the poor, working class peoples, descendants of slaves, migrants, and refugees, – “in exchange for their loyalty.” To grasp the hierarchical complexity of policing, one must face up to the status of whiteness (“white supremacy”) and property fetishism. The police are not only “servants of capital,” as per Maher, but also, whether in the U.S. or Australia, the history makes it clear that, as soon as slavery was abolished, “all of a sudden the police became incredibly important to control the movement of these free people through the process of criminalisation and, ultimately, convict leasing and mass incarceration,” a pattern that persists to this day. African Americans are incarcerated at around 5 times the rate of whites.¹³ In an imperial colony, an Indigenous Australian “is 14 times more likely to be incarcerated than a non-Indigenous Australian.”¹⁴ These disproportions speak volumes about the metabolic pathways in our societies. As Elliott-Cooper emphasises, the problem of policing also hinges on property ownership and its protection as decisive aspects of a neoliberal society, “a nation of property.” “The more the state is able to create a relationship with property which is personal, rather than collective, the greater they can create a reliance (or a perceived reliance) on the police and prison systems.” Particularly in the context of colonised lands, every citizen must be educated to pose a question to themselves and their friends: on what grounds do I (and, by extension, my heirs) believe this land can be owned? And be aware that those who frame conversation by preconceived answers are among the coarsest interlocutors.

Necropolitics is coterminous with armed conflicts maintaining the self-devouring order. Elliott-Cooper urges to “erode, get rid of, and replace the structures of power and inequality and oppression, which lead to people harming others.” Specifically,

we need to focus on “mutual aid and solidarity, rather than growth, extraction, and the profit motive,” and “to unlearn the forms of heteropatriarchy and racial hierarchy which make these forms of violence and exploitation possible.” The struggle against these paradigms clears a way for a world where prisons and police may become obsolete. “If you don’t rebuild society on different foundations, the same old institutions will continue to develop,” Maher warns us. Mutual care and mobilisation, the interlocutors stress, form a backbone of the change in question. While Elliott-Cooper provides examples of community-led initiatives in the UK, like “a domestic violence shelter,” Maher invokes the “micro-understandings” of a police-less world with reference to conflicts between family members and friends, where tensions can be mitigated through dialogue. In the same vein, he adds that our most recent events, such as the Minneapolis riots, provide examples of “inclusive, multi-racial and multi-class, self-defence community patrols ... preventing certain kinds of harm from being perpetrated by young people, encouraging them not to burn community centres and spaces, encouraging them to go home, bringing them to their parents instead of bringing them to the police.” Finally, Maher and Elliott-Cooper establish connections between wars on drugs, the enlargement of police forces, and colossal fatality/incarceration rates. If the nation-states were interested in supporting disadvantaged populations, if the latter were able to negotiate material conditions as a gateway to fulfilling lives, then we would be “able to think in a more clear-headed way about what our communities need in terms of protection,” Maher concludes. Indeed “why, with all the growth in policing that’s happened over the past 40 years,” bearing in mind the unprecedented funds flushed into the body of police, rather than community initiatives, is society “still not as safe as we would want it to be?”

GRAPHOMANIA

“Whenever I ask a certain acquaintance of mine to tell me what he knows about anything, he wants to show me a book: he would not venture to tell me that he has scabs on his arse without studying his lexicon to find out the meanings of *scab* and of *arse*.”

Montaigne, “On Schoolmaster’s Learning”¹⁵

The multiplicity of voices in this volume is intended to appeal to a heterogeneous readership. Still, because journalists and, particularly, philosophers today almost with no exception are trained at universities in disjointed departments, and because for Foucault *parrhesia* is an educational problem, we must be realistic about the odds of a suitable education being delivered in a tertiary setting. Accordingly, let us reflect on a message from Crispin Sartwell who meant to contribute to our volume, but was unable, due to the unpredictable circumstances we have all been navigating recently:

Should we try this?: Academia is the most *aparrhesiastic* of contexts ... Academic philosophy is written in dry bursts of complexity and a thicket of references; journalism at least ought to be lively, and footnoteless. Academic philosophy is intended for philosophy professors and graduate students, journalism for some broader audience. The differences are professionally located and professionally enforced. So the question arises whether either of these situations, or both together, do or could encourage the telling of difficult truths, which is what I conceive to be their common purpose. Not to be too depressing about it, but it is extremely hard to envision, let’s say, the academy moving in this direction; it’s been headed the other way emphatically at least since the 1980s. I suppose I think it is structurally unsuited for such an outcome.

Is academia an *a[nti]parrhesiastic* milieu? The reader should decide for themselves, but here are a few facts. Formalised in accordance with the cut-throat labour market of our day, in the ultra-liberal university jobs are modelled not unlike in a corporation, spearheaded by top managerial guns, packaged by marketologists and law firms toward the accumulation of assets and prestige from draconian performance expectations. Affiliated – or even identified – with such a business-oriented milieu over the course of time, only the most vigilant can resist internalising its values and limits. This complex phenomenon is widely criticised

by anxious graduates, fierce freelance thinkers, and some academics who muster the courage to bristle at their own milieu, having a reputable social standing. Two teachers meet in one reflection:

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes: “‘Brother,’ ‘sister,’ ‘comrade’ are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie because in their thinking my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming’ (Fanon 11). This is exactly the sort of discouragement that masters have always encouraged. Every relationship is ultimately based only on the self-interest of the human animal, which effectively renders ‘equality’ and ‘liberty’ fantasy words dissimulating their own resentment and reality. There can be no real friends or enemies in the realm of generalised competition, simply opportunistic transient groupings based on tactical considerations; all such tactical considerations have as their alpha and omega the god of economic growth.”¹⁶

Coming from “below,”¹⁷ let me open my gut, “heart and mind completely,”¹⁸ adding several perspectives to the above. First, despite the official narrative of multiculturalism, like in popular politics, there is an issue of cronyism verging on nationalism. Whether in the case of designing syllabi or job offers, the status quo is kept safe through systematic protectionism based on professional and in-group similitudes, including ethnocentric reckonings, and underhand favours. Thus, one is caught in a schizo trap of going global while staying provincial. And we are not to forget the good old gerontocracy: the youth is our future, unforeseen, but remember that first a junior must learn to bend over backwards! Then, since nominally racial capitalism clusters people into the powerfully rich against the poor, we note that only academic researchers qualify to exercise the prerogative to dip into governmental grant schemes, the funds that are typically split behind the walls of the ivory tower. Moreover, major philosophical societies today, in the Australasian region and elsewhere, adopt the vulgar jargon of “inclusive culture,”¹⁹ while executive members at the helm of these organisations are exclusively academics. This ilk of meritocracy is a borderline intellectual sectarianism: as

though thinkers labouring outside of or on the fringes of academia, outlawed but not outnumbered, in principle had nothing meaningful, neither skills nor vision, to offer.²⁰ In a nutshell, there is presently very little dialogue, for dialogue assumes symmetrical interest. The truth is that along the borderlands – material and methodological, ethical and ethnic – great struggles take place, resourceful enough to retrofit the mainstream palaeontology of thought for a new audience. Camus’ journalistic work for *Combat* is one supreme educational example. Also, as per Moten & Harney, Maldonado-Torres,²¹ Tommy J. Curry,²² and other undercover rebels, one can take advantage of the resources available in state/industry-sponsored education, weaponise them, while being openly critical of its ethos, apparatus, and bureaucratic intrigues. Let us listen to Dilar Dirik in her recent “Self-Critique,” written shortly after a stint at Oxford University:

As I see more plainly now, honest descriptions of reality are impossible under the shadow and influence of imperialist state propaganda – inevitable especially in places like Oxford and other institutions that are invested in the arms industry and entangled with government, the military, intelligence, and capitalist accumulation. The so-called ‘academic literature,’ i.e. the body of vetted written work, developed mainly by middle-class liberals invested in structures of western power, often creates more confusion than clarity. Over-investment in it, coupled with an ideologically-motivated refusal to engage with popular anti-systemic theories developed in the resistance against the forces of oppression, inevitably reinforces passive, liberal worldviews (and lifestyles) even among those scholars that fashion themselves as critical. Moreover, as academics like to think of themselves as critical, complex thinkers, they are often less likely to accept the influence of total information warfare on their understandings of the world. Serious and sensitive questions around deep state politics are usually anxiously avoided, ridiculed, or swept under the carpet. A more rigorous grappling with the ways in which the world is organized would profoundly shake the fundamentals of the western

academy, and so, psychologically clinging onto conventional arguments and discourses is the safer option for one's individual career.²³

Difficult truths reach their didactic efficacy in plain speech. We shall now uncouple “dry bursts of complexity” from Foucault’s problematisation of *parrhesia* in terms of “frankness,” “truth,” “danger,” “(self)criticism,” and “duty.”²⁴ Upon commencing university studies, the pressure to read and write standardised essays, making Montaigne turn in his grave, is imposed as a rule of thumb. In this fashion, one comes to recognise their community of peers, their nomenclature and parlance, being gradually induced to parochialism, dressed as an area of specialisation. In this process, does anybody care to ask questions like Foucault: “How can we recognise someone as a *parrhesiastes*? ... What is the training of a good *parrhesiastes*?”²⁵ Or: is a good *parrhesiastes* at the same time a revolutionary? Nevermind, the professional pressure is reinforced as one attempts to climb up the chain of command, if that is their desire. Today, you must systematically prove yourself to a generic statistical median, commensurate with one’s slot in the hierarchy, as a break between an open-ended philosophical life-style (*kata phusin*) and philosophy as an academic way of life is dilated.²⁶ A critical activity marketised on a promise to spark a passionate desire for knowledge, justice, and self/world-discovery, then, tends to snap into an impulse to research and publish to the utmost of one’s abilities, so as to learn erudition while earning professional currency. A name for this impulse is *graphomania*.

To be sure, some things that are said/published are indeed critical (but are they self-critical/anecdotal?), risky (but do they entail risks to one’s sense of security?), and veridical (but are they dutiful and context-sensitive?). While neither Foucault nor I wish to be too Kantian about it, unlike a rule (*arkhē/ἀρχή*) that commands obedience, duty is that which goes beyond self-interest (e.g. one’s research interests). Duty is not necessarily universal in the prescriptive sense, gods forbid, it does not have to be sanctimonious, but, bottom line, it assumes attention to the enduring ills affecting all of us. Foucault remarks:

The last characteristic of *parrhesiastes* is this: in *parrhesia*, telling the truth is regarded as a duty. The philosopher who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept the truth, for instance, and who may be exiled, or punished in some way, is *free* to keep silent. No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so.²⁷

In the contemporary context, we therefore call into question the validity of a corporate copyright stamp on the work of authors ascending to *parrhesia*. The pretence to knowledge sharing is a worldwide hoax. A great many people like myself with no access to a university library are reluctant or simply have no means to engage with research protected by insatiable publishing phalloglomerates. [Kiss the ring: with a turnover of £833 million in 2024, OUP & partners now accept outstanding research on poverty and colonial reparations – publish or perish, bitch!] If Foucault is right, then whom do we owe a duty to – a small segment of the demos dwelling in atomised tertiary spaces, or a greater whole? And wouldn't a frank commitment to the latter influence our preferences and enlarge our capacity to collaborate dangerously?

At last, the polysemy of the concept of *graphomania* can be illustrated with reference to situations as diverse as the ramblings of deranged minds, pornographic fixation on social media,²⁸ and savouring one's own thoughts in print. Our mission is to inoculate the academic variant of this penchant through self-care. In *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault evaluates "mania" via archaeological optics, but for our purposes, at the base level, it is characterised by the embodied mind being inflamed,²⁹ or "agitated by a violent and continuous movement."³⁰ Well, it is not unnatural for an author to research and write, but when it is done out of a deep-seated sense of insecurity, that is, for fear of failing to meet hard deadlines and expectations, or for fear of losing one's credentials, prominence, and job – in living out these prospects of pain and fright, one's own somaesthetic rhythms become deformed and managed in accordance with the aggressive penal rules of the game. In another text on body-politics, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault refers to structurally comparable processes of forging governable subjects in terms of

“docile bodies.”³¹ Like Freud before him,³² Foucault also underscores the intimate link between mania and its cold counterpart, melancholia. Incidentally, it is unsurprising that, since neo-academic culture encourages to extract everything one has in mind and more, students and staff today, band-aided by free counselling and fitness services, are threatened by the progressing epidemic of affective disorders.³³ “Fear robs us of our freedom,” Lars Svendsen aptly remarks, and “spontaneity is a vital part of our freedom.”³⁴ Would readers not *choose* to work – read, feel, reflect, imagine, write – at their own pace? Is its form continuous? Am I educated to keep vigilant to the current natural flow of thought, one that fosters health against all odds?

My style is rather explosive, and we hope it will pass; at heart, it is impressionistic and slow-burning. Foraging on a blazing evening in the wooded umbra, – sunrise and moonset, – love-making among ants on the erg. But enough of writing in water. To sum up the foregoing, shall we try this?: Deep inside, academic life is akin to fucking a stranger with a condom on – the older you are, the less it makes sense, comrade!

SCENIUS

In closing, to dramatise our setting, let us recall luminary Pythagoras, lamenting:

What mind am I supposed to bring to the secrets of the heavens, having death and slavery ever present before my eyes?³⁵

What will keep Foucault’s body of work significant is this engagement with perennial errors afflicting all of us, our lifestyles, objects of our fears and desire, and our institutions. During the *parrhesia* lecture series, delivered just before his death, Foucault must have been growing aware of his incurable condition, as intimated by his partner Daniel Defert.³⁶ A busy way of life is prone to swathe one in a veil of distance from death, and yet it can strike us down literally at any point, right? Given the pervasiveness of preventable crimes around the corner and in the media today, one can’t help but to be embedded in morbid events. What

mind? What education? Perhaps Foucault's radical pedagogical tone can be in part explained by the proximity of his own demise. It is therefore not too eccentric to suppose that in the context of "the same events occur[ing] again,"³⁷ to return to Pythagoras, had one considered their current cycle of research as their last, not only their approach to it, but also its subject, would be seriously affected.

Having no intention to impugn Foucault's glory, regarding contemporary *parrhesiastic modi operandi*, I can't resist siding with a master of graphomancy and other arts, Toni Morrison, insisting late in her life that, "We don't need any more writers as solitary heroes," that to live up to the present challenges, "We need a heroic writers movement: assertive, militant, pugnacious."³⁸ In solidarity, let me foreground a gnotion recently formulated by Brian Eno, namely "scenius," which stands for "the creative intelligence of a community."³⁹ As a collective form of intelligence and intuition emerging within a cultural scene, as a material possibility, scenius is juxtaposed with the obsolete category of "genius." In a somewhat pluralist manner, relying on his own wealth of experience in diverse circles, from the avant-guard to radical politics across five generations, Eno emphasises that "everybody has a particular and unique set of gifts and talents" and "secondly, that intelligence is generated by communities."⁴⁰

Here is one journalistic initiative, which may appear as an instance of scenius between philosophers and journalists, though it is a snippet of polyester capitalism, as our findings suggest. Precipitated by the COVID pandemic, it is called "An Open Letter on the Importance of Protecting Philosophy" (2020), published in Religion & Ethics section of ABC in the wake of "massive fee increases for HASS students," leading to severe financial shortages in the humanities.⁴¹ Targeting "the government's misguided approach to the funding of undergraduate education," this letter is signed by over a hundred Australia-based philosophers. So far, so good. Characteristically, however, the authors are more proud of the Australian thinkers who made it to the stardom (Princeton, Cambridge), rather than, say, their sessional colleagues, who characteristically live in precarity. In any case, this letter is not *parrhesiastic* not only because some of its speech acts incorporate the

familiar business jargon, e.g. “teaching and research excellence,” but primarily because, as such, it poses no danger to the signees addressing the abstract body of the government, the members of which probably never read it. Put differently, it is a simulacrum of *parrhesia*, like a barely moving plastic globe. For an initiative like this one to qualify as *parrhesiastic*, thinkers with deep institutional ties would need to go out of their ways to come to terms with the wider intellectual and artistic scenes and invest in work with various communities for mutual enrichment. It is the right time for great generosity! Ultimately, “The Open Letter” falls short of a *parrhesiastic* work because it is generated by a transient professional grouping more concerned with protecting their jobs and piety than with showing philosophy’s healthy teeth in the face of bigotry. If philosophy’s reputation today is so pale that it requires a prosaic apology, intended for the masses systematically voting in demagogues and proto-fascists with no adequate training in the subjects of governance, perhaps it is the time to defend the mother of inquiry at the social and grass-roots levels.⁴² To this end, in lieu of condescending indifference, thinkers, artists, and activists having skills and passion to mediate public projects are to be acknowledged appropriately, as a matter of choice.

By way of conclusion, the authors in this volume position their research in a great range of inter-related contexts: the mass media carcass and punitive social traps, capitalist imperialism and theocracy – all have a hand in schesmatizing the world. Our special volume introduces readers to various forms of kinship as courage: friendship (Carvalho), *irenic parrhesia* (Schwartz), collective *parrhesia* (Heidari), shamanic *parrhesia* (Hall), loving *parrhesia* (Roebke & Maldonado-Torres); and pays tribute to our bonds with war and surveillance victims (Xhignesse and Baumann, respectively), as well as with racialised and criminalised subjects (Baumann; Elliott-Cooper & Maher). Even minimal *truth-telling* efforts may set in motion significant changes, visible and invisible, as we know it through stories and personal experience. Our readers are unanimously encouraged to stage context-sensitive and provocative conversations and events, to learn and play a hunch. In line with Foucault’s orientation of thought, concomitant with these acts of dissent

are diverse open-ended practices spiralling around mutual duty and care. “The target of this new *parrhesia*,” Foucault reminds us, is a matter “of changing one’s style of life, one’s relation to others, and one’s relation to oneself.”⁴³ In short, it is about changing one’s life, simple things, even if it is too late.⁴⁴

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Ed. by Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001, 13. The Pearson edition is the author's taste preference, in part due to the rawness of the material and intimacy of the classes at Berkeley. The Collège de France lectures were gloriously crammed, whereas, as John Carvalho relates, the earlier "course at Berkeley was attended by a group of between fifteen and twenty auditors," which makes a great difference, pedagogically speaking.
2. Here, perhaps the most misunderstood today are the Cynics. Taking root in Socrates' student Antisthenes, in Diogenes the Dog, who offers riveting accounts of city life, the line runs through the likes of Lucian and Rabelais, Diderot, Nietzsche and Bakhtin, recently erupting in Sloterdijk's *Critique*. Interestingly, Foucault's interpretation of cynical parrhesia is emblematic of this misunderstanding. He doesn't seem to get the joke as a weapon of wisdom (a courage to laugh), unable to resist the urge to dismantle it. See: *Fearless Speech*, 119-133.
3. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920, 156.
4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions, 2013, 140-41.
5. Kenneth Goodman, "Journalism and Philosophy." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophy* 83:1 (September 1989, 35).
6. Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, and many other experimental writers are notorious for illuminating counter-cultural and underground matters, not least because such matters are not susceptible to reveal themselves to the standard forms of inquiry.
7. Also exemplified by Feodor Dostoevsky, Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, and most recently, by Toni Morrison and Claudia Rankine.
8. This trend is illustrated by numerous texts, e.g. David Berry, *Journalism, Ethics, Society*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2008; Christopher Meyers. *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*. Oxford: OUP, 2010; Aaron Quinn. *Virtue Ethics and Professional Journalism*. Berlin: Springer, 2018; Tony Harcup. *What's The Point of News?: A Study in Ethical Journalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
9. There is only one more work worth mentioning in the context of relevant literature, *Philosophy and Journalism*. New York: Longman, 1983. Authored by John C. Merrill, a journalism professor, and C. Jack Odell, a philosophy professor, the book shows the differences and parallels between the disciplines and approaches. Today, it seems more important to design new critical methods and techniques, rendering both differences and commonalities mutually expedient, which is our concern here.
10. See: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. London: William Heinemann, 1925, 6.24-6.26, 6.40-6.41, 6.53, 6.58.
11. Curiously, a witch of philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, was in the habit of taking "massive and regular doses of drugs, including chloral hydrate, bromide, opium, hashish, and a mysterious 'Javanese preparation'" – the latter suggests his familiarity with non-Western ways to access ontological spheres. See: Daniel Breazeale, "Ecce Psycho: Remarks on the Case of Nietzsche." *International Studies in Philosophy* 23:2 (1991, 19). Also, Camus: "It is said that Nietzsche after the break with Lou Salome, in a period of complete solitude, crushed and uplifted at the same time by the perspective of the huge work he had to carry on without any help, used to walk at night on the mountains overlooking the gulf of Genoa and light great bonfires of leaves and branches which he would watch as they burned" (*Create Dangerously: The Power and Responsibility of the Artist*. Trans. Sandra Smith, New York: Vintage Books, 2019, 15).

12. A loving friend of Michel de Montaigne, responsible for the posthumous publication of *The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (1577).
13. Nazgol Ghandnoosh, "One in Five: Ending Racial Inequity in Incarceration." *The Sentencing Project*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/one-in-five-ending-racial-inequity-in-incarceration/>
14. Giulia Bertoglio and Briana Shephard, "An Indigenous Australian is 14 times more likely to be incarcerated than a non-Indigenous Australian." *ABC News*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-04/hopes-voice-could-bring-certainty-community-justice-wa/102922506>
15. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*. Trans. M.A. Screech, London: Penguin, 182.
16. Justin Clemens, "Boom Boom." *Australian Humanities Review* 58 (2015, 116-17); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox, New York: Grove Press, 2004, 11.
17. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 18.
18. *Ibid.*, 12.
19. Not to mention a deep-rooted problem stemming from the dictatorial ontology of whiteness raised above. See, for example, Nayoung Aimee Kwon, "Decolonizing Our Institutions." In a decolonial manual, ed. Valery Vino, Santa Barbara: punctum books (in press); Sarah Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012; and Teresa Córdova, "Power and Knowledge: Colonialism in the Academy." In *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo, Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998, 17-45.
20. Latin *secta*, fem. past participle of *secare* "to cut." Keep an eye out for our collaboration with Ian Hunter that ascertains the distinctions between philosophy and sectarianism. Meanwhile, see: Ian Hunter, "Heideggerian Mathematics: Badiou's Being and Event as Spiritual Pedagogy." *Representations* 134 (Spring 2016, 116-156); and also his "The History of Philosophy and the Persona of the Philosopher." *Modern Intellectual History* 4:3 (2007, 571-600).
21. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "From Decoloniality Light to Combative Decoloniality: Personal Reflections on a Decade of Decoloniality Schools in South Africa." In a decolonial manual, ed. Valery Vino, Santa Barbara: punctum books (in press).
22. Tommy J. Curry, "The Anti-thesis of the Claim A Reflection on the Practices of Decolonization from both Sides of the Atlantic." In a decolonial manual, ed. Valery Vino, Santa Barbara: punctum books (in press).
23. Dilar Dirik, "A Self-Critique." *The Shedding* (November 2024). Available from: <https://dilaridirik.substack.com/p/a-self-critique>; also see her *The Kurdish Women's Movement: History, Theory, Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2022.
24. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 12-20.
25. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 172.
26. The role of the rogue Diogenes the Dog in making a lifestyle out of parrhesia, and in influencing Foucault, cannot be overstated. See: Darren Gardner, "Cynicism as Immanent Critique: Diogenes and Philosophy of Transvaluation." *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 39:1 (2002, 123-148).
27. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 19.
28. Adam Thirlwell, "We're Gripped by Graphomania': Why Writing Became an Online Contagion and How We Can Contain It." *The Guardian*, August 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/aug/12/were-gripped-by-graphomania-why-writing-became-an-online-contagion-and-how-we-can-contain-it>
29. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, 97.

30. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, 122.
31. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 135ff.
32. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Complete Psychological Works Volume XIV*, trans. James Strachey, London: The Hogarth Press, 2001, 243-258.
33. See, for example: Kasey Meeks, Amy Sutton Peak, and Adam Dreihaus, "Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Among Students, Faculty, and Staff." *Journal of American College Health* 71:2 (March 2021); Gabriel X.D. Tan, Xun Ci Soh, Andree Hartanto, Adalia Y.H. Goh, and Nadyanna M. Majeed, "Prevalence of Anxiety in College and University Students: An Umbrella Review." *Journal of Affective Disorders* 14 (December 2023); and Mary Ellen Flannery, "The Mental Health Crisis Among Faculty and College Staff." *NEA Today*, March 7, 2024, <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/mental-health-crisis-among-faculty-and-college-staff>
34. Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Fear*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008, 127-28.
35. The origin of this quote in classical literature is indistinct. Montaigne cites it off the top of his head in "On Education of Children," advising that here Pythagoras addresses Anaximenes in a letter. However, there is no reference to this line in either Diogenes Laertius' account of Anaximenes' or Pythagoras' lives (as indicated in M.A. Screech's seminal translation). Montaigne may have dug it up elsewhere, and we trust him.
36. James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993, 21-26.
37. Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*. Trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, §19, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/porphyry_life_of_pythagoras_02_text.htm
38. Toni Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-Fiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008, 163.
39. "Brian Eno on Scenius." Posted on September 28, 2021, by Peter Macdonald, YouTube, 1 min., 35sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77mbz2HbY5Y>; see also Brian Sterling, "Scenius or Communal Genius." *Wired*, June 16, 2008, <https://www.wired.com/2008/06/scenius-or-comm/>
40. "Eno on Scenius."
41. Australia-based Philosophers, "An Open Letter on the Importance of Protecting Philosophy." *ABC Religion & Ethics*, August 3, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/open-letter-on-the-importance-of-protecting-philosophy/12517642>.
42. In 2020, in partnership with my friend Soreti Kadir and Brimbank City Council, our donor, we were planning to launch Project A, designed to bring together a team of academics to teach a special curriculum to disadvantaged adolescents from migrant and refugee backgrounds on the outskirts of Melbourne. The ensuing global pandemic interrupted our plans. However, it is noteworthy that an overwhelming majority of academics we reached out to politely rejected the invitation due to lack of time, with the exception of several discerning pedagogues, including one of the founding editors of this Journal, Jon Roffe: bless him.
43. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 106.
44. We owe a debt of gratitude to Bobby Shumoail-Albazi (*PUFF DOWN: Underground Hip-Hop Zine*) for his meticulous proof-reading of the entire volume; to Seraphim, my copy of Alpha & Omega, and to Vivijan, my Aboriginal blondie; to Majid Heidari, Joshua M. Hall, and Gwendalynn Roebke for their supportive reviews of this essay; and to the Journal's editorial team for their patience and patronage.