We need to talk about Chelsea Manning



When whistleblower Chelsea Manning was released from prison last May, I penned an essay for *The Verge* titled “One of Us” about how she had become “a hero, even a saintly figure” to many trans women in particular. It was a testament to her courage and dignity amid Kafkaesque injustice, something I still admire in Manning. Many of us on the political left, desperate for a heroine in difficult times, were eager to put Manning on a pedestal — elevating her to the sort of suffocating heights that almost inevitably precede a fall. Looking back on it now, it revealed a lot about the accelerant of social media, race, and gender, and how all three intersect with cults of celebrity.

I’ve been reflecting on this a lot since the recent revelations that Manning had spent time with members of the white supremacist alt-right — including sharing an escape room experience and visiting one’s home to play board games. Her questionable fraternizing became public knowledge after she tweeted that she had “crashed” an alt-right party celebrating the first anniversary of Trump’s presidency, because she had “learned in prison that the best way to confront your enemies is face-to-face in their space.” But critics quickly noted that this confrontation had not seemed very confrontational, and she had been photographed laughing, drink in hand, with Gavin McInnes, the founder of the white nationalist youth gang The Proud Boys. Even Pizzagate conspiracy theorist Mike Cernovich claimed that he and Manning had shaken hands at the event.

In response to the immediate backlash — including accusations that she was a turncoat — Manning spoke with *The Daily Beast*, insisting she was not socializing but instead gathering

intelligence on the extreme right (a tactic sometimes used by anti-fascist activists). “I viewed this as an opportunity to use the celebrity and fame I’ve gotten since getting out of prison to gather information and to ultimately find ways in which we who are against the alt-right can undermine the alt-right,” she told *The Daily Beast*.

The reaction to this was as complex as it was furious and fiercely polarizing, shattering the fragile coalition of enthusiastic leftists and respectful but lukewarm liberals whose support Manning had enjoyed. Many queer women of color, myself included, were furious with Manning for her naïveté in engaging with white nationalists as a celebrity. White trans women radicals, meanwhile, by and large, closed ranks around her, insisting she had done nothing wrong and was, rather, a tactical genius. Many trans veterans, who never liked Manning to begin with, are crowing. Many mainstream liberals, including erstwhile supporters, have thrown her overboard entirely. Conspiracy theorists like Louise Mensch have argued Manning must be a Russian agent.

After a week, Manning herself seemed worn down by the fury:

> *its been over a week since ive let everyone who helped me out of prison down, so many of you have helped me thru tough times, i tried too hard to do too much, im sorry im a human being and not a symbol, i have hit rock bottom*
>
> *— Chelsea E. Manning (@xychelsea) January 30, 2018*

But the fiasco’s implications go beyond Manning to the dissociative effects of hero worship, especially on social media; how they turn people into icons and symbols who are not permitted to be fully human, particularly when they’re asked to carry the unbearable weight of an oppressed community’s hopes and dreams.

When I wrote “One of Us,” Manning had just been released; I wanted to celebrate her new lease on life, and all I wished it could offer her.

“The greatest gift we could give her is the ordinariness that is normally accorded to anonymity among the masses, a sense that she is not a holy woman whose every appendage is an icon to be treasured in some reliquary. ‘One of us’ will have to mean something Chelsea Manning can rest in, can be herself in, can be flawed and silly in. That’s what she deserves, and it is what I hope to play some small part in giving her.”

Instead, Manning underwent an apotheosis. But if we made her into an angel, blessing us all with her emoji-sprinkled tweets, it was because so many others cast her as a demon. This polarization was yet another variation on the ancient tug of war between Madonna and Devil that governs the image of all women; neither image is human, neither can contain our failures. For trans women, there’s added pressure. We’re disordered and diseased in the minds of some, fit only to be criminalized and institutionalized. The idealization of our luminaries can be more intense precisely because they radiate proof against such bigotry. They have to carry not just the weight of celebrity, but the image of an entire community that treats them as an emissary to a hostile world.

Social media only magnifies this objectification. At a certain level of fame, people become memetic — ideas and symbols, content to be consumed, rather than fallible human beings. This isn’t a new phenomenon for celebrities, but as with so much else, the internet democratizes this impulse and accelerates it to light speed. Every time we built Manning up as an icon — with every like, every meme, every beatific tweet about how she could do no wrong — we ensured that her inevitable fall would be that much more painful. Aided by social media, her Biblical arc, from Creation to Fall, only

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I'll never forget the furious reaction in some corners of the trans community when actress Laverne Cox repudiated a video where she read a letter from an incarcerated trans woman. Although she had intended to "highlight the horrific conditions many trans people experience during incarceration," she later learned that the letter-writer had been convicted of the 1993 rape and murder of a child. One white trans man, a prominent figure in the small world of trans professionals, scorned her loudly and publicly for this decision. In his mind, she had caved to a pressure campaign from reactionary groups that wanted to tar *all* trans people as criminal and pedophilic. "How can we ever trust Cox again?" he thundered.

I remember feeling a bit put off by the man's fury. "Why were you *trusting* her at all?" I wondered. I reserve trust for friends and loved ones. Celebrities are merely people whose actions I have opinions about. But it hit on a critical dynamic in marginalized communities where our exemplars are not just seen as successful people, but avatars of our hopes and dreams, with expansive responsibilities to their community. We invest trust in them to stand for us because they're one of us, a symbolic role that asks one person to contain *all* our humanities, with little room left for that of the host.

There is nothing to suggest Manning's radical convictions are anything less than sincere, but her actions were devastatingly naive. Nor was there much to be gained from her "reconnaissance," per her reflections at *The Daily Beast*, save that "[alt-right personalities] don't actually believe the things that they say. I just feel they're opportunists and that they exploit their Twitter followers' fears." This is

likely true, but also not very pertinent. Alt-right extremists often use the intimation that they're "just kidding" or "trolling" to slither out of being held accountable for their actions, as a leaked copy of the "style guide" for the neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* makes painfully clear. Whether a mouthpiece believes what he says is irrelevant, their fans do believe it, and therein lies the harm.

Also, at the risk of stating the obvious, rule one of spying is that no one knows who you are. Leftist infiltration of fascist movements is a time-honored tradition, but such functions are best performed by activists who are not public figures; it's not a job for the "face of the movement."

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On the night of the revelations, it was Manning's celebrity that opened the door for the alt-right to have a social media field day, alternately spreading transphobic abuse and loudly declaring that Manning's operation proved they weren't hateful bigots after all. ("We treated her well and didn't call her a man!") It was an embarrassing, easily avoided spectacle that created a massive headache for everyone in LGBT and radical politics. And, regardless of her intentions, she hurt people who looked up to her. As mistakes go, hanging out with extreme nationalists is quite severe.

What might lead her to take such a path? Her personality, celebrity, and prior incarceration may all have played roles. Celebrity culture can seduce a person into a lonely, distorted feeling of indispensability. When Manning saw the terrorism summoned by the alt-right and their Nazi allies at Charlottesville she felt *she* needed to *do* something; when she devised a plan, she carried it out alone. She left the network behind. In RPG terms, she split the party.

Had Manning stepped back and truly assessed her role as a node in a network, she might have realized that she could not do

this alone, that there were a variety of jobs to be done, and that she was better suited to rallying people than personally infiltrating extremist groups.

And fame can be disorienting even without the utterly dehumanizing and stultifying effects of incarceration; Manning endured seven years of imprisonment, which totally disconnected her from the rapidly evolving online discourse around the extreme right. The 24/7 news stream of communication and debate those of us on the outside were taking for granted was denied to her. Then, suddenly, she was assigned a place of leadership in a world that was very different from the one she had left behind.

“The thing people need to understand about Chelsea is she’s still adapting to her role as a celebrity after years and years of being a prisoner and a soldier,” a source close to Manning told me. “She’s a human being and she struggles just like everyone else, but she also sees how high the stakes have become and feels like she can’t just sit around while things get worse.”

Is “don’t hang out with fascists and let them use you” really a hyper-new norm in political discourse?

And yet, is “don’t hang out with fascists and let them use you” really such a hyper-new norm in political discourse? For many queer women of color, it seemed there was an additional factor that could help explain the debacle — idealistic white privilege gone awry. If you aren’t in a racial or ethnic group targeted by the extreme right, it’s a lot easier to indulge a certain innocence about the sheer depravity of these sorts of extremists. For the rest of us, knowing what they’re really about, and why you can’t play nice with them, is drilled into us from birth.

“I think Chelsea made a colossal error of judgment, not that she’s a secret white supremacist,” said Angela (a pseudonym), a trans woman of color and a prominent community organizer.

“She saw evil, decided she had to do something about it, and then rushed in… Like a lot of young white radicals, she just didn’t think the implications and consequences through. I do think the alt-righters were definitely trying to recruit her, or, failing that, wreck her credibility, and she played right into their hands – poor judgment that did real harm.”

Manning admitted as much, telling *The Daily Beast,* “regardless of good intentions, I leveraged my privilege to gain access to spaces others couldn’t dream of entering safely.” Giving a propaganda tool to the extreme right, of course, is difficult to forgive for those of us whom they want to “peacefully ethnically cleanse.”

Still, there have been no shortage of defenders insisting that Manning did nothing wrong. When the photo of Manning at the escape room surfaced, for example, some leftists called it a “terrible photoshop.” It was later confirmed by *The Guardian* and Manning herself to be genuine. While it’s critical to stand with her against the deluge of transphobia that has been unleashed on her in the aftermath – or the fatuous claims that she’s a “traitor” or a “Russian agent” – Manning is poorly served by enablers who insist that there was *nothing* for her to be sorry about.

She is not a demon beyond forgiveness; she’s a person. But that means that she has to accept and learn from her mistakes. Those of us who support her, in turn, should also think critically about our own need to build up our heroes into infallible paragons. If she is to grow as a thinker and activist then she needs constructive critique from her fellow radicals, not a fantasy of infallibility.

Manning’s canonization had consequences; we’re experiencing them now

I am not exempt from this reckoning. Was my own Manning essay hero-worship? Did I contribute to all those “Chelsea is perfect” memes that blossomed on Twitter? If I’m honest, yes.

Despite what I wrote at the end of “One of Us,” I knew she wouldn’t retreat to happy obscurity and I was secretly *glad* she didn’t. It felt like the trans community needed an angel of radical hope in the age of Trump’s aggressive attacks on our humanity. But her canonization had consequences; we’re experiencing them now.

The way out of this wilderness is, as always, to keep the flawed humanity of heroes foremost in our minds. We can look up to them as role models, perhaps, and celebrate their successes, but it is too much to ask that we *trust* them or treat them as extensions of ourselves. The arms-length approach to activist celebrity now seems like the best model for all varieties of fame, one where a prominent figure is respected but never treated as familial or deific.

To do otherwise, I now realize, is to set ourselves up for a lifetime of little treasons. How else does one feel when a jealously guarded possession seems to rebel? I know I held so very tightly to my heroes — adult-sized teddy bears to cling to during political storms — but this is untenable, and unfair. To myself, to my community, and to them.

In the end, I can only speak for myself when I say this: Chelsea, I forgive you, and I let you go.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/7/16976180/chelsea-manning-alt-right