

Friends,

I'm deeply saddened that I can not be here with you today.

A few months ago, while speaking on the phone from jail with one of my friends out in Brooklyn, I came to a startling realization. I said: "I remember growing up as a kid searching for someone to look up to – someone to lean on for inspiration. I needed an idol."

Right then I realized, the thing I needed as a young kid is now available. I said, "Wow, look at all these kids and teens and young adults in the queer community – THEY FOUND EACH OTHER."

I felt something so profound that I broke down crying, and my friend did too. I finally felt that word that gets thrown around – I felt PRIDE. I almost yelled into the phone: "I'm so fucking proud of my community. I'm proud of you. I'm proud of what we have – of what we've built together."

Despite everything, we as a community face daunting challenges every day. The world feels colder and more alien somehow. Our society constantly reminds us – in both obvious and subtle ways – of the need for us to meet THEIR standards. To meet THEIR expectations. We somehow always need their approval.

Our spaces changed. Our neighborhoods gentrified. Our protests became parades. Our acts of defiance became exhibitions. Our love and rage were commodified – turned into something that could be packaged and branded and sold.

Christopher Street, Washington Square, Stonewall – on these streets, on this land which rightfully belongs to the Lenape people, the true history of queer and trans liberation is written. All these places tell stories: Stories of solidarity, of love, of rebellion. Our movement for freedom began here, and the fact that you are all standing here today proves it is far from over.

The first pride was a riot. But we will not allow that historic struggle to simply become a catchphrase on designer T-shirts. We are here today because we know that no matter how much they claim otherwise, the forces of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy have always – and will always – work against queer and trans justice. We are here because we know that rainbow-branded storefronts are not signs of acceptance, but of oppression with better marketing. We are here because we know there should be NO PRIDE FOR SOME OF US WITHOUT LIBERATION FOR ALL OF US.

We are here for trans women of color, who, despite leading the fight at Stonewall 50 years ago, continue to be attacked and killed on our streets, in jails and prisons, and in our own communities. We are here for Layleen Polanco, who just a few weeks ago was found dead in solitary confinement on Rikers Island. We are here for Johana Medina León, a 25-year-old asylum seeker from El Salvador, who died in ICE custody on the first day of Pride Month. We are here for Ashanti Carmon, Zoe Spears, Muhlaysia Booker, and the 8 other trans women who have been murdered this year alone. We are here for our queer and trans siblings, and all the children who have been separated from their families and placed in concentration camps at the southern border. We are here for sex workers, and to demand the full decriminalization of sex work. We are here for indigenous people, on whose land we now march. We are here because a society that relies on prisons, police, borders, and military intervention is fundamentally at odds with queer and trans lives.

We stand here today because we refuse to accept these injustices. Because we believe in a better world – a world that we create every single day. Every action we take brings this world into reality. We see it when we stand in solidarity for our incarcerated queer siblings. We feel it when we reclaim our spaces and march in streets. We experience it when we build systems of mutual aid that allow our communities to thrive without the intervention of the state.

Today, I hope you will look around you and see this world. It is not a utopia in the far-away future – It is here. It is our community. It is us. We Got This.

Your Friend in Struggle,

Chelsea Elizabeth Manning

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