

Excerpt from *Won't Be a Ghost*, a performed essay about Chelsea Manning

When I was a closeted transgender teen, I spent a lot of time online, chatting on AOL with other queer kids. I was able to imagine myself in a way that seemed impossible in my daily life. The other kids held that space for me, and I held it for them. It felt safe precisely because we were disconnected from our bodies. The warm, protected, and slightly stifling nowhere of chats just didn't feel like it had the same consequences. It was like a confession booth; we all shared an unspoken sense that what happened online was confidential. And without seeing someone else's face, it's easier to project sympathy, warmth, understanding, whatever you needed.

I recognize something of my teenage self in the chats between Chelsea Manning and Adrian Lamo. I see Chelsea projecting that desire for safety and trust onto Adrian. It must have felt powerful for her to talk with someone who could not see her body: her boy body in army fatigues. Someone who seemed to understand her feelings about her gender. She could show him the parts of herself she wanted seen. Her need to be to be validated and recognized as a queer person with strong moral convictions outweighed her concerns for her safety. She must have known the risks, but she seemed to be blind to the consequences.

I am plagued by the US army prosecutor's line of argument: "Ultimately, Your Honor, that's why you have to divorce whatever issue PFC Manning apparently had from the crimes in this case. The United States is not disputing that PFC Manning may have been struggling with his gender identity. The government's only question is why that matters." I don't understand how to divorce Manning's identity from her choices. Her very existence as a queer trans soldier stands at odds with the culture of the US military. I think her way of navigating a culture that had no place for her was to develop a unique moral compass. I think it's that particular moral compass compelled Manning to break rank, and to expose secret information about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, two the most morally confusing and classified wars in US history. When society makes no place for you, and yet you still exist, you stand outside, looking in. And you see the cracks. Chelsea Manning is a person who spent her entire life in the closet, and who now writes that she sees herself as a "transparency advocate." This is a person who knows how damaging secrets can be.