

# Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability

*\*Femmes Of Color Symposium Keynote Speech, Oakland, CA  
(8/21/11)*

Good afternoon, and thank you for having me. It is lovely to be here with you all. Thank you to the symposium organizers who have asked me to be here and for your hard work putting this gathering on. And thank you to ALL the folks who have made it possible for us to be here, including the people who built this building and who clean it and care for it everyday;

including the people who are being violently exploited in this country and around the globe for their resources and labor so that we can exist in this air conditioned hotel with access to clean water and food, able to sit in relative safety from military attacks or the police barging in. And including and honoring native and first nations communities upon whose land we are currently on and whose colonization and genocide have also allowed us to be here. For this too, must be part of our work, for it is intimately connected to being femme.

I would like to call into the room the many other comrades who move with me in this work for community, revolution and liberation. Especially, other queer disabled women, gender non- conforming and trans people of color. I do this work **with** and **for** them as well as for those yet to come. I do this work because it is what I wish I had had when I was growing up and coming



into political consciousness.

I want to bring them into the room because I want to seriously resist, challenge and shift a culture of celebrityism in our movements. I do not, and cannot do this work alone. It is built on the backs of poor people, queers, women of color, disabled folks and *so many more who have come before me*. It has taken so much for me to be able to be here today as I am, about to speak to you about being femme as a disabled queer woman of color. Has taken so much for us to even get to the point where gender and femme would be considered worthy political subjects to speak on. Taken so many (in particular) women of color who have struggled long and hard to claim a place and be seen as women against the loud static noise of white-womanhood; who have fought to connect gender and race and left a legacy of brilliant work, poetry and story for us to learn from. Taken so many disabled women of color working to have our lives seen (by other *women of color*) and our bodies understood as worthy, refusing to let disability be in opposition to “woman.” Refusing to let able-bodied femmes dictate what femme gets to be and demanding accountability to ableist notions of gender, beauty, sexuality and desire that supposedly represent “all of us.” Thank you.

It is important to say that I can only speak from my own lived experience, nothing else. I cannot and do not speak for all disabled people or all adoptees or all queer people. I cannot and do not speak for all queer disabled women of color or all queer people of color. I do not speak for the entire disability justice movement—or any other movement. The disability justice movement, like all movements, is large and diverse and I could never speak or represent it all.

I do this work in service of community. I tell my story with the knowing that our stories are tools for liberation. I speak knowing that all of our voices are important. I speak to leave evidence for the people like me who are searching

for reflection and recognition and a “yes, we exist.” I speak to leave evidence for folks who have been told that disability is not as important as race, or that gender justice will have to wait until after class equality is won. For folks who have been told that how you feel is less important than what you think; for those who don’t have the luxury of being able to rattle off 10, even 5, writers or books that reflect their identities or experiences. Those of us who straddle the lines between multiple oppressed communities. *For those of us who are working to end violence for all of us, not just some of us. For those of us who truly believe that no one’s safety is more important than anyone else’s, even when **we** feel unsafe...*

I’d like to start our time together with a moment of breath and awareness for this work and what we are holding. I would like to remind us of our bodies and honor them as we hold the work of those of us who get the lived experience of being femmes of color in liberation and ending violence and oppression so that we all may shine; not just some of us. It is not easy work and I think it is important to recognize the toll it takes on our bodies, hearts, minds and spirits day in and day out. I want to acknowledge that many of us here are survivors of one form of violence or another, many of us have been witness to violence; many of us have been violent, caused harm, colluded in violence, willingly or not; and *all* of us have been impacted by a culture of relentless violence, especially towards women, gender non-conforming and trans people of color, whether they identify as femmes or not. I would like to acknowledge that we carry legacies of abuse, trauma and violence with us everyday, into our work, into our relationships, into this room. Our stories about gender and race and class and ability and size and immigration and family are carried in our bodies, breath and spirit ...AND we also bring legacies of resistance and survival and love in the face of silence and erasure that carry us through, we bring those into this room as well and they are also with us all the time. We bring legacies of resiliency that are deep and strong

and which we are a part of. And in all of our work we have a responsibility to grow and cultivate resiliency, just as much as we resist the current systems at work. We must not only fight against the world we currently have, but also be working to create the kind of world that is inspired by our deepest desires for our selves, our families (whom ever they may be, including chosen family) and our communities.

And it is from *this place*, where I would like us to always start. From the world we want, the world we collectively desire.

I always think it is important to say that I'm here today as a queer, disabled, korean woman, transracial/transnational adoptee, raised in a US territory in the Caribbean. None of which are more or less important. For me, these are not just descriptive terms; they are political identities, based out of my own and other people's lived experiences, and I understand them—all of them—to be powerful ways of moving through and understanding the world...

What I have learned from living in the south has helped me to survive as a queer person; and what I have learned from being adopted has helped me to survive as a disabled person.

To me, femme must include ending ableism, white supremacy, heterosexism, the gender binary, economic exploitation, sexual violence, population control, male supremacy, war and militarization, and ownership of children and land.

Ableism must be included in our analysis of oppression and in our conversations about violence, responses to violence and ending violence. Ableism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability. Ableism set the stage for queer and trans people to be institutionalized as mentally disabled; for communities of

color to be understood as less capable, smart and intelligent, therefore “naturally” fit for slave labor; for women’s bodies to be used to produce children, when, where and how men needed them; for people with disabilities to be seen as “disposable” in a capitalist and exploitative culture because we are not seen as “productive;” for immigrants to be thought of as a “disease” that we must “cure” because it is “weakening” our country; for violence, cycles of poverty, lack of resources and war to be used as systematic tools to construct disability in communities and entire countries.

I would like to share two quotes with you that resonated with me for today:

*“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.” – Audre Lorde*

*“To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that’s political, in its most profound way.” –June Jordan*

I want to say upfront that I don’t identify as femme. I have struggled with identifying as Femme. I don’t politically identify as “Femme,” even though I get the lived experience of being a femme of color in so many ways. And frankly, much of this is because I have had horrible interactions with self-identified femmes of color, much of which has been because of their ableism

and ignorance around how ableism, white supremacy and gender oppression get leveraged everyday in service of each other. Much of it has been because of the *palpable* culture of ableism within queer people of color community. And some of it has been because *I have spent most of my life as a physically disabled child, youth and adult adoptee of color trying to find my way into “human,” let alone “woman.”*

As a disabled child shuffled through the medical industrial complex and as a baby of color shipped across the world to “new parents,” I have felt more like a different species, a freak, an object to be fixed/saved, a commodity. Like someone who has been owned and whose body has never felt like it was mine. Like someone who they were trying to make human (read: able bodied, white), if only the surgeries had worked and the braces had stuck. Like something that never could even get close to “desirable” or “feminine” or “woman” or “queer.” Like ugly. Not human.

Many people assume that I identify as femme and even call me femme, but the truth is that “femme” has not felt like a term where I belonged nor was it a place I wanted to be. I rarely see femme being done in a way that actually challenges and transforms gender, rather than colluding in an alternative enforcing of gender. Many of the people in this room are more invested in being beautiful and sexy than being magnificent. Even something as small as the time I nervously asked a comrade femme of color friend of mine to wear sneakers in solidarity with me, instead of her high heels, because I didn’t want to be the only one and didn’t want to get chided from other femmes of color about my shoes (as so often has happened). She said “no,” but she (of course) “totally didn’t think there was anything wrong with wearing sneakers.”

It seems so basic in our communities, but I think we need to stop making assumptions about each other’s identities and make distinctions between

***how someone identifies verses what someone's lived experience is.*** We need to make the distinction between descriptively femme and politically femme.

In my disability justice work this comes up a lot. Especially for disabled women of color. Over and over I meet disabled women of color who do not identify as disabled, even though they have the lived reality of being disabled. And this is for many complicated reasons around race, ability, gender, access, etc. it can be very dangerous to identify as disabled when your survival depends on you denying it.

*When I say “descriptively disabled”, I mean someone who has the lived experience of being disabled. They may not talk about ableism, discrimination or even call them selves “disabled,” but they know what it feels like to use a wheelchair, experience chronic pain, have people stare at you, be institutionalized, walk with a brace, be isolated, etc. There are many people who are descriptively disabled who never become or identify as “politically disabled.” When I say “politically disabled,” I mean someone who is descriptively disabled and has a political understanding about that lived experience. I mean someone who has an analysis about ableism, power, privilege, who feels connected to and is in solidarity with other disabled people (regardless of whatever language you use). I mean someone who thinks of disability as a political identity/experience, grounded in their descriptive lived experience. (The same is true for descriptively queer, descriptively woman of color, descriptively adoptee and so on.)*

And just to be clear, I believe that in order to politically identify as queer, disabled, femme, woman of color, one needs to have a descriptive lived experience to ground it in. my political identities come directly out of my lived experience. I never used to identify as disabled (period), even though

my life was extremely disabled. It was not until 1998 that I even started to describe myself as disabled—and even then, it was only descriptively. It wasn't until 2002 that I started identifying politically as disabled.

Doing disability justice work, we struggle with creating spaces that are based on how one identifies, because often times, the disabled people who identify as “(politically) disabled” are often white disabled people. As people with multiple oppressed identities doing work with (our) folks on the margins of the margins of the margins, we need to think carefully about how we are inviting people into spaces and how we meet people where they're at.

I am descriptively femme of color. I know this. This has always been my lived experience. I was femme before I was queer. I was grappling with how to navigate gender as a tiny Korean transracial and transnational adoptee disabled girl queered by my physically disabled body. I grew up in a feminist community, around other powerful femmes of color, but none of whom identified that way. There was no word for it, it was... just their life. It was how they had to learn to be, to survive. It was what they had crafted out of the fires of their desires and loving. It was part of how they had learned to be magnificent.

Their gender was about being a grounded force to end violence. Their gender was about forging dignity out of invisibility that could slice through femininity that would rather be pretty than useful. Their gender was about answering the question, what is the work you are doing to end violence and poverty, not what shoes are you wearing. Their gender was about feeding family and raising children collectively; organizing for themselves when no one else would. Their gender was a challenge to the world they lived in that was trying to erase them.

As femmes of color—however we identify—we have to push ourselves to go



deeper than consumerism, ableism, transphobia and building a politic of desirability. Especially as femmes of color. We cannot leave our folks behind, just to join the femmes of color contingent in the giant white femme parade.

As the (generational) effects of global capitalism, genocide, violence, oppression and trauma settle into our bodies, we must build new understandings of bodies and gender that can reflect our histories and our resiliency, not our oppressor or our self-shame and loathing. We must shift from a politic of desirability and beauty to a politic of ugly and magnificence. That moves us closer to bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb. Bodies and movements ready to throw down and create a different *way for all of us, not just some of us.*

[\*share North Carolina story]

The magnificence of a body that shakes, spills out, takes up space, needs help, moseys, slinks, limps, drools, rocks, curls over on itself. The magnificence of a body that doesn't get to choose when to go to the bathroom, let alone which bathroom to use. A body that doesn't get to choose what to wear in the morning, what hairstyle to sport, how they're going to move or stand, or what time they're going to bed. The magnificence of bodies that have been coded, not just undesirable and ugly, but un-human. The magnificence of bodies that are understanding gender in far more complex ways than I could explain in an hour. Moving beyond a politic of desirability to loving the ugly.

Respecting Ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled. Seeing its power and magic, seeing the reasons it has been feared. Seeing it for what it is: some of our greatest strength.

Because we all do it. We all run from the ugly. And the farther we run from it, the more we stigmatize it and the more power we give beauty. Our

communities are obsessed with being beautiful and gorgeous and hot. What would it mean if we were ugly? What would it mean if we didn't run from our own ugliness or each other's? How do we take the sting out of "ugly?" What would it mean to acknowledge our ugliness for all it has given us, how it has shaped our brilliance and taught us about how we never want to make anyone else feel? What would it take for us to be able to risk being ugly, in whatever that means for us. What would happen if we stopped apologizing for our ugly, stopped being ashamed of it? *What if we let go of being beautiful, stopped chasing "pretty," stopped sucking in and shrinking and spending enormous amounts of money and time on things that don't make us magnificent?*

*Where is the Ugly in you? What is it trying to teach you?*

And I am not saying it is easy to be ugly without apology. It is hard as fuck. It threatens our survival. I recognize the brilliance in our instinct to move toward beauty and desirability. And it takes time and for some of us it may be impossible. I know it is complicated. ...And I also know that though it may be a way to survive, it will not be a way to thrive, to grow the kind of genders and world we need. And it is not attainable to everyone, even those who want it to be.

*What do we do with bodies that can't change no matter how much we dress them up or down; no matter how much we want them to?*

What about those of us who are freaks, in the most powerful sense of the word? Freakery is that piece of disability and ableism where bodies that are deformed, disfigured, scarred and non-normatively physically disabled live. Its roots come out of monsters and goblins and beasts; from the freak shows of the 1800's where physically disabled folks, trans and gender non-

conforming folks, indigenous folks and people of color were displayed side-by-side. It is where “beauty” and “freak” got constructed day in and day out, where “whiteness” and “other” got burned into our brains. It is part of the legacy of Ugly and it is part of my legacy as a queer disabled woman of color. *It is a part of all of our history as queer people of color. It is how I know we must never let ourselves be on the side of the gawking crowd ever again in any way.* It is the part of me that doesn’t show my leg. It is the part of me that knows that building my gender—my anything—around desirability or beauty is not just an ableist notion of what’s important, but will always keep me chasing what doesn’t want me. Will always keep me hurling swords at the very core of me.

There is only the illusion of solace in beauty. If age and disability teach us anything, it is that investing in beauty will never set us free. Beauty has always been hurled as a weapon. It has always taken the form of an exclusive club; and supposed protection against violence, isolation and pain, but this is a myth. It is not true, even for those accepted in to the club. I don’t think we can reclaim beauty.

Magnificence has always been with us. Always been there in the freak shows—staring back at the gawking crowd, in the back rooms of the brothels, in the fields fresh with cotton, on the street corners in the middle of the night, as the bombs drop, in our breaths after surviving the doctor’s office, crossing the border, in the first quiet moments of a bloody face after the attack is done. Magnificence was there.

Magnificence was with me in the car rides home after long days being dehumanized, abused and steeled in the medical industrial complex. It was there with me when I took my first breaths in my mother’s arms in Korea, and a week later those first days alone without her realizing I wasn’t going home.

*Magnificence has always been with us.*

If we are ever unsure about what femme should be or how to be femme, we must move toward the ugly. Not just the ugly in ourselves, but the people and communities that are ugly, undesirable, unwanted, disposable, hidden, displaced. This is the only way that we will ever create a femme-ness that can hold physically disabled folks, dark skinned people, trans and gender non-conforming folks, poor and working class folks, HIV positive folks, people living in the global south and so many more of us who are the freaks, monsters, criminals, villains of our fairytales, movies, news stories, neighborhoods and world. This is our work as femmes of color: to take the notion of beauty (and most importantly the value placed upon it) and dismantle it (challenge it), not just in gender, but wherever it is being used to harm people, to exclude people, to shame people; as a justification for violence, colonization and genocide.

If you leave with anything today, leave with this: ***you are magnificent.*** There is magnificence in our ugliness. There is power in it, far greater than beauty can ever wield. Work to not be afraid of the Ugly—in each other or ourselves. Work to learn from it, to value it. Know that every time we turn away from ugliness, we turn away from ourselves. And always remember this: ***I would rather you be magnificent, than beautiful, any day of the week. I would rather you be ugly—magnificently ugly.***

Thank you.