

Restrictions? Ha! We're too damn pretty for your restrictions!

Keynote, Femme Conference 2010

by Kate Bornstein

May I please ask the members of the Femme Collective to stand and be recognized?

My deepest thanks to the Femme Collective, conference committee chairs and members, volunteers, and donors for the wonderful planning, programming and execution of this conference. I have never—in fifteen plus years of conference going—never have I attended a conference where there was something going on every single moment that I've wanted to take part in. So thank you my dearest hearts at the Femme Collective for selecting me as one of your keynote speakers this year.

Thank you, Ari

And to you, conference attendees all, thank you lending me your ears and your hearts for the next 30 to 45 minutes.

When the Femme Collective asked me to keynote this conference, I saw stars. I got dizzy and weak in the knees. All my life, I've wanted to be girl... being chosen to deliver this keynote is a dream come true. I feel like Miss America up here. More importantly, I want you to know that all my life, you have been who I wanted to be. You are my heroes and heroines. You have always been my angels.

I grew up on the New Jersey shore in the 1950s. My family lived in a small town surrounded by three country clubs. Each club was set back from the road by a gate and a long driveway up to the clubhouse. Posted at the gate of each of these country clubs was a small, dignified sign that read, "Restricted."

When I was old enough to become curious, I asked my father what it meant.

"It means no women, no coloreds, and no Jews," is what he told me.

As a Jew, I was restricted. But I got a job at one of those country clubs, as a caddy. They let me work there, but I couldn't be a member. Sound familiar?

Most of the signs I read growing up were stop signs.

These signs said

Boys' Playground, Girls' Playground

Stop!

Ladies' Room, Gents' Room

Stop!

The Old Boys network and Women's land. Women born women only

Stop!

These were signs of the times. I never knew which sign to follow, cuz they all said stop to me. The only green lights I ever got—the only signs that said GO—was YOU.

When life got hard—when it all looked hopeless—whenever I've been lost or locked out, it was you—my fierce femme family—it was your visible courage that told me yes, you can be sexy. It was your visible courage that told me yes, you can be cute.

The road to femme one of the rockiest of all life's roads for all of us. The road to femme has got hairpin turns. The road to femme is a road that's dangerous to travel in the dark. All because the world keeps telling us that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

But my dream of a femme identity shone bright as a beacon, and I am so grateful to you for the company you've kept me on my journey: you femme girls, you femme bois, and you femme everything-else who welcomed me on all the different roads to femme that we may have at times travelled together.

I was the fat Jewish boy in my school... and I made it to femme.

I was daddy's best boy... and I made it to femme.

I'm an ex-Scientologist—I worked with L. Ron Hubbard himself. He was the founder of Scientology, and I was First Mate on his ocean-going yacht—and I made it to femme.

Twelve years in Scientology left me with certified post-traumatic stress disorder—and still... I made it to femme.

Back in 1970, I ducked out of military service in Viet Nam with a psychiatric deferment. It was an act back then, but today? On good days, I'm merely depressed, but more than one therapist has considered a diagnosis of bipolar disorder or borderline personality. But femme has been for me a beacon of hope. Maybe one day, I'd say to myself... maybe one day I could be sexy. Maybe one day, I could be a pretty girl, a cute girl—even though the world kept telling me that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

On your journey to femme, who were the people who told you NO?

What were the rules or ideas, beliefs or maybe laws that told you NO?

No... you're not welcome in this club.

No... you're not respectable enough.

No... I know what femme is, and you are not femme.

Well, despite all the restrictions, we each of us found a way in.

Some of us braved our way in through the front door.

Some of us crawled into femme through the bathroom window.

Some of us entered femme from inside a cocoon.

We each of us—here in this hall—we entered femme in our own unique fashion.

We each of us needed—and heeded—the fashion tips from the femmes who'd made it.

And we all have our reasons for traveling to femme, don't we? My own journey to femme began as a survival tactic for daddy. Daddy has always been part of femme for me, cuz I'm a Beta Wolf and I've always wanted an alpha wolf to make me feel complete. You know what an alpha wolf is. They're the ones who own things. They own territory. They own mates. Alpha wolves are daddies—and sometimes mommies—and they own their children.

My father was an alpha wolf. L. Ron Hubbard, the Founder of the Church of Scientology, was an alpha wolf. Each one of my three wives, and every butch dyke I've ever bedded has been an alpha wolf. All my daddies have been alpha wolves. Woof!

When you're a beta wolf, you do what you're asked to do either because you're in love or maybe you're terrified, or both. But you learn how to work it. Puppies know how to work an alpha wolf daddy.

Aren't puppies just the cutest things? They flip over on their backs and stretch way out and they wriggle and get so excited they pee themselves. Isn't that cute?

This is cute as survival, cute as life-and-death. Cute is what puppies and beta wolves do to protect ourselves. We are sayin',

I don't want your land. I don't want your mate or your children.

Look at me, here's my throat, here's my belly.

Rip me to pieces if that's what you've got to do.

I'm no threat to you.

You've got me so scared I'm peeing myself.

But aren't I really cute? You don't wanna hurt me. You wanna cuddle me.

Yeah, beta wolves know how to work an alpha daddy. That's how I got around my restrictions.

We all have stories about our journey to femme. Here's mine, in short, the way I wrote it down in the performance piece that I've been turning into my next book...

When I was first a girl, I was a 38 year old man, and I had to make up for lost time. It wasn't easy. I had to learn girl from the ground up just like I'd had to learn boy. It wasn't pretty.

When I was first a girl, it was the 80s. Gay men were dying by the thousands and it was only the luck of the draw that I wasn't one of them.

And the world kept telling me that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

When I was first a girl, the huge dose of hormones they shot into my hip every week

took six months to kick my system over from testosterone to estrogen and for six months I hovered on the edge of my own private menopause while I watched my penis shrivel until my surgeon said he'd have to take two patches of skin off my butt... for depth, he said...in the new vagina he would build for me.

Depth? I asked him, What do I need depth for?

Right, he says, smacking his head, like he could have had a V-8, You're a lesbian!

And the world kept telling me that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

When I was a girl, bleeding didn't just happen to me, I learned how to do it to myself, I used surgical scalpels and razor blades. I used anything sharp.

When I was a girl, I'd already perfected my anorexia as a teenaged boy.

When I was a girl, I spent a year as an owned and collared slave with no name. They just called me, "girl."

When I was a girl, it was Gulf War I.

When I was a boy, it was Korea.

When I was a man, it was Viet Nam.

Now that I'm nothing, it's Gulf War II.

Or is it Afghanistan? Who can keep track?

When I was a girl, nobody knew it but me—because when I looked into a mirror, all I could see was clown. All I could see was fat man in a dress. And I was skinny!

On a bad day, clown what I see in the mirror.

On a bad day, clown is what I see in your eyes and in the eyes of anyone who might catch more than a glimpse of me. Fat man in a dress.

That's what I'm sure my neighbors see when I walk out the door of my home in East Harlem. I walk down the brownstone steps and heads swivel in my direction—jackals catching the scent of prey on the wind. The junior high boys do a double take at how impossibly tall I am. The junior high girls check out what I'm wearing. Until mercifully, a neighbor lady sings to me,

"Good morning, mami."

East Harlem ladies call each other *mami*. If I can get just one of the neighbor ladies to call me *mami* in front of those kids, I'm home free. I'm just another neighbor lady.

Guys in their cars call out to me.

"Lookin' good, bay-bee!"

They see blonde with legs up to here, and they see hot. They don't see hands are too big, they don't see jaw too boy. They're not lookin' for details. They're lookin' for pussy and I am it.

125th Street and Lexington Avenue. The addicts and the whores assemble like geese.

"You off to work, sugar?"

They think I'm one of them, and that comforts me. We're a family of fallen angels, and we are pretty. Then someone walkin' by gives me a dirty look, says to his friends

Look! It's a guy!

For years, when that happened? I became a clown — all over again

I'm a fat ugly man in a dress. I'm a clown all over again.

And the world kept telling me that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

For many of us—the moment we claimed femme as we have defined it for ourselves—the moment we embodied femme, we were awestruck and humbled by the knowledge and experience of having actually *achieved* femme... if only for a moment.

And we continue to be humbled by the joy and our victory of identity, and what is that but a signal for us to become generous with the privilege we have as femmes among femmes who still believe themselves to be restricted from the family of femme.

When we get it that we've made it to femme, that's the time to give back to our femme sisters, our femme brothers, and to anyone who's got the courage to sail their lives

toward femme. When we make it to femme, we help others, in the way so many generous femmes helped us.

So, what was it like where you lived... ?

...when you first walked into the world, as femme as you could make yourself?

Were you embraced?

Is femme something you teach yourself every day?

Who were your teachers?

Who were the femmes who said, hold on baby.

That color's not quite right on you, or

Wait, you've got lipstick on your teeth, or

Honey, she's no good for you. You deserve better than that.

Who were the femmes who taught you how to walk tall and girly?

It was the mid 1980's Philadelphia sex workers who taught me sexy.

It was '80s drag queens, Doris Fish, 'Tippi,' and Miss X who took me under their sweet wings and taught me femme.

Can I hear some applause, please for the femmes who gave us a helping hand?

I've tried-on femme in all sorts of configurations.

How about you?

For me, it's been a regular revolving door of fashion.

I've been ugly girl and I learned to do comedy. I grew myself a sense of humor.

I've been fat girl and I learned how to hide in broad daylight.

I've been starve-myself-skinny girl and I learned rage.

I've been tall girl and I learned how not to intimidate people just by standing next to them.

I've been hippy girl, goth girl, riot girl, and drag queen GIRRRRRRRRL!

I've been the tranny girl you could take home to meet your parents,

And I've plain old, bad-ass, pierced, scarred, branded and tattooed lady tranny girl.

What kind of femmes have you been?

I've been phone sex girl, pro domme girl, and slave girl

and from being these, I learned self-respect.

I was a madonna wannabe, and once I was Laura Branigan, lip-synching Gloria

I've been siren-with-the-long-red-nails, and I've been Princess Diana waif.

I've been nerd girl.

I've been too-old-for-girl girl.

I've been suicidal girl... a lot.

I've been daddy's girl... finally!

And I've finally learned how to be cute, sexy girl with no daddy at all.

Even though the world keeps telling me that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

I can prove to myself I'm femme because I still have all the shoes it took me to get through each of those kinds of girl. There's a strength I get from being each of these kinds of femmes. I'm 62 years old now, and at my age, that makes me a crone, a diesel femme, a mama lion, and your everlovin' Auntie Kate.

Now, I've heard a lot about femme invisibility, and I'd be remiss as your keynote speaker to overlook this notion. Listen to me, please.

You are not invisible. Honest.

Yes, yes. Sometimes our sexuality is invisible. But femme never, ever is, and it's femme we're here to celebrate amongst ourselves.

Fifteen years ago, I cried to my therapist:

“People keep staring at me,” I cried. “Why are they staring at me.”

“Honey,” she said—without missing a beat, “just look at how you’re dressed. You’re fabulous.”

It was an ah-ha moment, believe you me.

Not that I believe I’m pretty, not at all. I do however listen to you when you say I am pretty, and I’ve come to trust you. My trust in you is what keeps me brave.

My darlings—I am NOT invisible and neither are you. I *was* an invisible girl, and it’s taken me over sixty years but I am finally visibly sexy, and I am visibly cute.

How long were you the invisible girl before you made it to femme?

Folks on the street can call me a man. Folks on the street can call me a faggot. And it doesn’t bother me near as much. Cuz whatever it is they think they see when they see me? I know they’re seeing something sexy, something cute. That does not make me evil. That does not make me a dummie.

Invisible? I don’t think so. We all of us walk out into the world and we say,

“Look at me, honey. Just check me out.”

And they do, don’t they? They check us out. That’s our skill. That’s our magic. It’s called glamour. Glamour is what witches and wizards and vampires have all been able to pull off: we can make people think we’re pretty. We can make people wanna fuck our brains out. We can make people fall head over heels in love with us.

No matter what we look like, no matter where we’ve come from, if we really set our minds to it, and our hearts, we can do that—each and every one of us, and that’s femme with no restrictions.

When we turn on our high-beams? We light up the dark corners of age, race, and class.

When we walk into a room? We melt gender. We melt sexuality.

And no matter how we’ve learned to do femme, no matter how much money we had or didn’t have to spend on clothes or hormones or surgery or shoes... no matter what

language we speak... no matter what shape our bodies have taken, no matter what abilities we have or do not have—we are so damn pretty. We are so damn hot. You know what I'm talking about.

Glamour is powerful magic, and you've got it. Every one of us in this room has got the magic of glamour.

Glamour is the femme magic that cuts through restrictions, and that is the reason people are so frightened of us. Our glamour is why people want to restrict us—even some people in the LGBTQetc community. They want to restrict us by telling us that sexy is evil and cute is dumb.

Where the *fuck* did those ideas come from anyway, and how has the dominant culture made those notions so difficult to shake off? Why did we ever believe that sexy is evil and cute is dumb? Allow me please, as crone, to deconstruct.

Let's start where the dominant culture starts—with the Book of Genesis, and the story of Garden of Eden. God made man and called him Adam. Then God made woman, and called her Eve. Never mind about Lilith, who was one hot babe from all the stories I've heard. Lilith climbed right on top of Adam and she rode that cowboy. Lilith was a demon. She was evil. But Adam didn't know that, not at first. Neither did Eve. The two of them walked around naked. They were sexy. I bet they were cute. And God said, help yourself to anything at all in this Garden. Anything at all. Just don't eat the fruit of this one tree—the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Well, you know what happened. The serpent seduced Eve and Eve seduced Adam and having eaten the forbidden fruit, they knew the difference between Good and Evil.

Eve used her sexiness to seduce Adam. So she was evil.

Cute Eve fucked up all of humanity. Boy, what a dummy.

And that's where it came from. But what makes it stick?

Let me be your mama lion for a moment and warn you of some dangers in the world from my many many years of running away from danger, and my many years of facing those dangers down.

Our journeys to femme—every single one of us—have included restrictions of race, age, class, religion—this is a list of oppressions that have shaped the kind of femmes we’ve become. Each of us has been restricted by language, citizenship, looks, and ability. We’ve been restricted by family and reproductive status. We are restricted by the rules of gender and sexuality.

There’s one word for all of those restrictions—these vectors of oppression—all put together: kyriarchy. Kyriarchy is a new word. I just learned it about a year ago. The word was coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as a modification of the term patriarchy to describe intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is the point of intersection of all those restrictions.

Look, there are three things that make life more worth living: identity, desire, and power (access to resources). Kyriarchy—the intersection of oppressions—hooks us by saying:

This identity is good, that identity isn’t.

This desire is allowed, that desire is perverted.

These people get some power, those people never will.

Each and every vector of kyriarchy succeeds in dominating us by convincing everyone including ourselves that they know best when it comes to our identities, desires, and access to resources (power).

So what has Kyriarchy got to do with the notion that sexy is evil and cute is dumb? What has Kyriarchy got to do with eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Interesting questions. But the most interesting question never gets asked: why didn’t God want us to eat that fruit? Why didn’t God want us to know the difference between good and evil? I think it’s obvious: God was warning us all to stay the fuck away from binaries.

Good and Evil? Nonsense! *Sexy* in and of itself is neither good nor evil. *Cute* in and of itself is neither dumb nor smart.

As femmes, we know about patriarchy and its army of misogynists. Well, patriarchy and misogyny represent just one aspect of kyriarchy—gender. But kyriarchy’s vectors of oppression all mask themselves as false binaries which restrict us:

Are you white or are you colored?

Are you old or are you young?

Are you rich or are you poor?

Are you a true believer or are you going to Hell?

Do you speak English, or something else entirely?

Are you a US citizen, or a terrorist?

Are you good-looking or are you ugly?

Are you able-bodied or a cripple?

Are you a man or are you a woman?

Are you hetero or homo?

Are you married with children, or are you a total failure?

All of these binaries stem from the knowledge of Good and Evil—which God warned us about!! *Don’t eat the fruit of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*, said God. What he was saying, I think, is...

Don’t see the world as a binary, because it’s binaries that restrict us.

Kyriarchy. What would the world—including LGBTQetc— look like without kyriarchy dictating our identities, our desires, and our power (access to resources)? It’s kyriarchy extending itself into the LGBT world where femmes are not as much invisibilized as much we are targeted.

As a tribe of femmes with no restrictions, we are learning and teaching each other how to trust and use our glamour—our visibility—to overturn kyriarchy and bring about world peace.

Well, you made me Miss America up here, and like any red-blooded all-American girl, deep down I really want world peace... with no restrictions.

So how do we parlay our glamour into peace on all the battlefronts of kyriarchy? We act as ambassadors wherever we go, and we reach out across vectors of oppression and we make alliances.

Our glamour, used with compassion, can bridge racism and classism—for example—because there are fabulous femmes of every race and every class and we just need to reach out to each other and say, “girlfriend, I like your look!” ...and whaddaya know?! The restrictions start to fall aside, and we’ve got the beginnings of an alliance. This is my key note for you, my dear hearts. We have marvelous magic in our chosen identities as femme—and that can save the world. Because, my darlings... this would be a really dreary world without sexy. This would be a really boring world without cute.

Now, I could be wrong. I could have fucked up the story of the Garden of Eden with all my postmodern deconstruction. And if that’s the case, every one of evilly sexy and dumb-as-a-post femmes us is going to hell. But I’m your mama lion, and I am not about to let you go to hell.

Everyone here today is going to get a *Get Out of Hell Free* card on your way out of the hall. It comes from my last book, *Hello Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks and Other Outlaws*. I’m sorry to say that at this moment, the book isn’t widely available because it sold out its third printing. However, if you go to the book’s website, www.hellocruelworld.net and click on the “Goodies” tab, you’ll be able to download a “light” 4 page version that should help you stay alive at least until the book is back on the shelf in early October.

The basic of the book is this: do whatever it takes to make your life more worth living. Anything. Anything at all. There’s only one rule, only one rule in the whole book that makes that sort of blanket permission work: *Don’t be mean.*

So please, do whatever the fuck it takes to make your life more worth living. Even if people think it's evil or dumb. Just don't be mean. And if anything you do to make your life more worth living gets you sent to Hell? Hang on to the card. Give it to Satan. I'll do your time for you. Honest. It's a deal I made with the devil.

I don't think I deserve to go to Hell. That's not the point. I'm your mama lion, and I am keeping my cubs out of harm's way, even if harm is coming from God. I'll do your time for you. Don't worry, I'm a big time masochist. I'll have a ball, and you get to do whatever it takes to make your life more worth living—as long as you're not mean.

OK. Wrapping up now. I'm glad I stayed alive to reach this point of my life and be here with you. All my life, you have been who I wanted to be. You are my heroes and heroines. You have always been my angels. In closing, please keep this in mind:

Ours is the voice of sexy in the world.

Ours is the voice of cute.

Together, we are the voice of hot, fierce, and dangerous.

We are the voice of seduction.

We are the voice of the wounded, and the terrified.

Please keep this in your heart:

Ours is the voice of sexy in the world.

Ours is the voice of cute.

Ours is the smart voice of those who aren't allowed to be smart.

Ours is the indignant voice of dignity,

Ours is the loudest voice of the silenced.

Ours is the kick-ass voice of the meek.

Restrictions? On femme?

Ha! Take a good look around you, take a look at all of us.

We are too damn pretty for restrictions.

Thank you for kind attention, my most beautiful of all tribes.