

SHAWN

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For me, **Femme is the ultimate expression of self** -depending on who you are- and it's the ultimate fuck you to gender norms and social constructs to gender and expression. People say, "Oh that's so daring," as if that's something brave, but its not really brave if you're just being you. I think people get all these accolades for being who they are, and its only notable because society has told them being who they are is not the right thing to do. I just think its people being themselves and ignoring all the rules that have been placed in society.

I grew up in the Midwest; I'm originally from Kansas and my parents are ministers. I started out with getting long braids, doing things that I felt were more representative of who I was. And then, when I came to DC a few years ago for an internship, I just saw the diversity here. Not only in ethnicity but in how people presented themselves and expressed themselves. And I realized I didn't have to be boring... **I didn't have to try to conform to white societal norms of being a Nine to Five, straight-laced, J crew wearing snob**, you know? So then I was like, "You mean I can fucking express myself however I want? That's great!"

I enjoy that being Femme makes other people uncomfortable. I am also a person with a disability; I have cerebral palsy. So **growing up, I was already used to people staring at me for being different**. And then, as I began to explore the different levels of gender and self-expression, people were staring for that reason too. Because of my disability I had to learn at an early age to flip the script on why people were staring. So instead of saying like, "**Oh my god they're staring because I'm weird or because I'm different.**" I told myself, "**They're staring at me because they think I'm hot!** He wants me, she wishes she could get me. That's why they're looking!" And then I think, as I started expressing more femininity and different levels of gender, that same thought process carried through. So, now I'm like, people are looking at me because they're intrigued and because they're interested. Sometimes people are looking at me because it's shocking, or because there's some like envy. **They're wishing that they felt they had that same freedom, and not realizing that they do**. Because society is a terrible, terrible shaming place for people who are different.

Anyone who questions roles or structures around gender and expression are more susceptible to violence and prejudice. I think when I hear a nasty remark, or I'm explaining femininity and masculinity and how those things are complete bullshit, people have a visceral response, and I have to push that back on them and say that's their own growth. That's the journey that they're on, not reflective of me and where I am. So yeah, letting people be on their journeys where they are, because none of us who identify as gender queer or Femme or any of these different levels of gender, none of us woke up to this enlightened sense of "this is who I am and this is why everybody is free to be who they are," because we grew up in those to same structures of bullshit, and had to fight our way out.

I was with a friend at the doctor's office this morning, and this guy who was LGBTQ and very feminine presenting in his appearance came up and he was just like "hey, I just wanted to give you and hug and say yay! We can get married now," and gave me a little hug. That was cute. I mean I don't really believe in marriage and I think that marriage equality only helped gay white people become more white, not people of color and that's not what this girl is about. **But the fact that they felt like they could like up and have that little "hey girl I see you" moment. That was beautiful**. Interpersonally, I haven't had that here. So that was nice, just that little sense of acknowledgment like we exist.