

# MAKING SPACE ACCESSIBLE IS AN ACT OF LOVE FOR OUR COMMUNITIES

*Note: This piece was one of many pieces written in the lead-up to the 2010 US Social Forum, as we planned Creating Collective Access (CCA) in, I think, three weeks. This is one of those pieces that you pound out from bed, at two in the afternoon or one in the morning, when you hurt and you can't sleep, to serve a purpose.*

I was asked to write something that would ask disabled people coming to CCA who didn't have chemical injuries to do the solidarity work of going fragrance-free for the gathering so that people whose disabilities meant that chemicals and fragrances made them sick would be able to attend. This was a particular, specific kind of access work, as part of the work involved my talking about fragrance and chemical access in a way that centered Black and brown people—to be specific, getting people to think of chemical access as not some weird shit only particularly annoying white vegans cared about but reframing it as something that Black and brown people have, due to everything from cleaning houses and working with pesticides to living in polluted cities, from having asthma to cancer. And to not only get people to reframe chemical disabilities from the whitewashed way they'd often been discussed but to provide a list of body and hair care products that were cheap, easy to get or make, and worked on Black and brown hair and skin. That last part became one of my most-used resources: “Fragrance-Free Femme of Color Genius” (formerly “Realness”), a compendium of products made with all my Virgo moon hyperfocus research skills.

But this piece picked up steam and got passed around in ways I hadn't expected. I guess writing about access as a form of radical solidarity called love hit a nerve.

When I think about access, I think about love.

I think that crip solidarity, and solidarity between crips and non(yet)-crips is a powerful act of love and I-got-your-back. It's in big things, but it's also in the little things we do moment by moment to ensure that we all—in all our individual bodies—get to be present fiercely as we make change.

Embedded in this is a giant paradigm shift. Our crip bodies aren't seen as liabilities, something that limits us and brings pity, or something to nobly transcend, 'cause I'm just like you. Our crip bodies are gifts, brilliant, fierce, skilled, valuable. Assets that teach us things that are relevant and vital to ourselves, our communities, our movements, the whole goddamn planet.

If I'm having a pain day and a hard time processing language and I need you to use accessible language, with shorter words and easiness about repeating if I don't follow, and you do, that's love. And that's solidarity. If I'm not a wheelchair user and I make sure I work with the non-disabled bottom-liner for the workshop to ensure that the pathways through the chairs are at least three feet wide, that is love and solidarity. This is how we build past and away from bitterness and disappointment at movements that have not cared about or valued

us. When I've said this, some people have reacted in anger, saying that disabled folks shouldn't have to be loved to get access. They argue that we should simply have our rights under the law, as disabled citizens, respected. For me, this is an excellent example of where disability rights bumps against disability justice. A rights framework says that the ADA and other pieces of civil rights legislation give disabled "citizens" our rights: we simply state the law and get our needs met. Disability justice says: What if you're disabled and undocumented? What if you think the settler colonial nation we live in is a farce and a hallucination? What if you don't have money to sue an inaccessible business? What if the people giving you accommodations and access technology—or not—are not paid for by the state but part of your community?

I agree that our access to access and the world should not be predicated on desirability or popularity or approval of the able-bodied masses—or anyone. And I hold a deep place of respect for the ways so many of us have been denied access to love. But when I say the word "love," I mean something more crippled-out and weird than the traditional desirability politics many of us are forced to try to survive and live within.

I mean that when we reach for each other and make the most access possible, it is a radical act of love. When access is centralized at the beginning dream of every action or event, that is radical love. I mean that access is far more to me than a checklist of accessibility needs—though checklists are needed and necessary. I mean that without deep love and care for each other, for our crip bodyminds, an event can have all the fragrance-free soap and interpreters and thirty-six-inch-wide doorways in the world. And it can still be empty. I've been asked to do disability and access trainings by well-meaning organizations that want the checklists, the ten things they can do to make things accessible. I know that if they do those things, without changing their internal worlds that see disabled people as sad and stupid, or refuse to see those of us already in their lives, they can have all the ASL and ramps in the world, and we won't come where we're not loved, needed, and understood as leaders, not just people they must begrudgingly provide services for.

I mean that the sick and disabled spaces I have been in, been changed by, helped make, stumbled within at their best have been spaces full of deep love. And that deep love has been some of the most intense healing I've felt. It is a love that the medical-industrial complex and ableist society don't understand. It's why doctors scratch their heads and remark that I seem to be doing so well, and then stare blankly when I say that I have a lot of loving disabled community and it's what helps me. It took ten years to begin to not hate my bodymind. It took ten more to even begin to be able to ask for what I needed, matter-of-factly, without shame.

I mean more. I mean things like the radical notion that everyone deserves basic income, care, and access. Everyone. Including people you don't like. Including people who are not that likable. I can think of people who have, frankly, acted like assholes and hurt people in my life, or me. Some of them I have still sent twenty dollars, when I had it, to their Indiegogos when they got disabled and needed money for rent, food, housing, or to move to a more accessible apartment or city. Because nobody deserves to die or suffer from lack of

access, even if they've been an asshole. I have seen some people doing the best DJ work possible, holding practices of, say, inviting everyone to their Friday night dinner—including people seen as cranky, unpopular, or difficult—because the most crippled-out folks were the most socially isolated and needed it the most.

Many of us who are disabled are not particularly likable or popular in general or amid the abled. Ableism means that we—with our panic attacks, our trauma, our triggers, our nagging need for fat seating or wheelchair access, our crankiness at inaccessibility, again, our staying home—are seen as pains in the ass, not particularly cool or sexy or interesting. Ableism, again, insists on either the supercrip (able to keep up with able-bodied club spaces, meetings, and jobs with little or no access needs) or the pathetic cripple. Ableism and poverty and racism mean that many of us are indeed in bad moods. Psychic difference and neurodivergence also mean that we may be blunt, depressed, or “hard to deal with” by the tenants of an ableist world.

And: I am still arguing for the radical notion that we deserve to be loved. As we are. As is.

At the risk of seeming like a Christian, or a Che Guevara poster, love is bigger, huger, more complex, and more ultimate than petty fucked-up desirability politics. We all deserve love. Love as an action verb. Love in full inclusion, in centrality, in not being forgotten. Being loved for our disabilities, our weirdness, not despite them.

Love in action is when we strategize to create cross-disability access spaces. When we refuse to abandon each other. When we, as disabled people, fight for the access needs of sibling crips. I've seen able-bodied organizers be confused by this. Why am I fighting so hard for fragrance-free space or a ramp, if it's not something I personally need?

When disabled people get free, everyone gets free. More access makes everything more accessible for everybody.

And once you've tasted that freedom space, it makes inaccessible spaces just seem very lacking that kind of life-saving, life-affirming love. Real skinny. Real unsatisfying. And real full of, well, hate.

Why would you want to be part of that?

So when you work to make spaces accessible, and then more accessible, know that you can come from a deep, profound place of love. And if you can't love us, or love yourself—know that the daily practice of loving self is intertwined with any safe room, accessible chairs, ramp. Both/and. When they are there, they show our bodies that we belong.

Love gets laughed at. What a weak, nonpolitical, femme thing. Love isn't a muscle or an action verb or a survival strategy. Bullshit, I say. Making space accessible as a form of love is a disabled femme of color weapon.