

5/4/21 Resisting Uglification and Reclaiming U.G.L.Y. with Vanessa Rochelle Lewis

17:05:36 Good afternoon, good evening, good morning, wherever you are in the world,

17:05:41 I'm Tigress Osborn. I'm the Chair of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, otherwise known as NAAFA,

17:05:49 and we are here today with a very special guest, Vanessa Rochelle Lewis. I'm going to introduce Vanessa in just a minute. Before I do that I have just a couple of quick announcements.

17:05:59 First of all, we want to thank the folx from Pro Bono ASL, who are joining us today to include interpretation for those who need signing. Pro Bono ASL can be found at probonoasl.com if you want to learn more information about this absolutely fantastic

17:06:18 organization and the work that they do to support accessibility.

17:06:23 I also want to tell you just a little bit about NAAFA in case this is your first time joining us. If you're new to NAAFA, we are a 52 year old fat rights organization that -- through education advocacy and support -- works towards Equality at Every Size.

17:06:39 We are super excited that May is our first ever Fat Liberation Month, and we've got a boatload of plans for fantastic speakers, fun activities, learning more online at our website naafa.org.

17:06:54 And later this week we'll be introducing a short, short tidbit web series on Instagram called the Fat 15 where we spend 15 minutes or less highlighting fantastic fat activists and projects that they're doing all over the United States and, and eventually

17:07:12 all over the world. So please keep an eye out for that on Instagram. You can find us on Instagram or your other favorite social networking sites @NAAFAofficial.

17:07:25 And we are on Instagram, Twitter and soon to be onTikTok. Y'all we comin' to the Tik Tok! Get ready!

17:07:32 I want to highlight a couple of events that are coming up this week as part of Fat Liberation Month.

17:07:38 Our next webinar will feature author Philip Barragan, who is the author of the prose novel and graphic novels Fatizen, and Phillip will be with us to talk about the world of graphic novels and how fat bodies are depicted in that world, and also about

17:07:55 his long history as a fat acceptance activist.

17:07:58 And then on that...and that is on Friday, May 7 at 11am Pacific, you can register at naafa.org.

17:08:05 And then on Saturday Bree XVI from HealedAF is going to be hosting a very special Fat Magic and Tarot session. You can also read about that and find information about that on naafa.org. That's Saturday May 8 at 2pm Pacific. So we're really looking forward

17:08:23 to that. We've got lots of other activities planned throughout the month. And with no further ado, I would like to introduce you to today's special guest.

17:08:33 Vanessa Rochelle Lewis, she/her, MFA is a queer fat Black femme performer, facilitator, educator, writer, activist, healer and joyful weirdo,

17:08:46 and fairy princess mermaid gangsta for the revolution!

17:08:50 In addition to being the Founding Director of Reclaim UGLY, which we'll talk about today, Vanessa has been a writer and co-managing editor for acclaimed feminist magazines,

17:09:00 Everyday Feminism, and Black Girl Dangerous, a community college instructor at multiple Bay Area schools and radical transformative justice

programs, a fundraiser and events coordinator for the Queer Women of Color Media Arts project,

17:09:16 the Artist in Residence for Young Women Freedom Center, where she facilitated art healing workshops and a master class for formerly incarcerated women, trans and non binary people, and so much more.

17:09:29 She is currently a core team member for Creating Freedom Movements, a year long social education project that supports grassroots visionary leaders to incubate healing and joy projects, while learning more about art theory and practices in social

17:09:46 justice movements, and a creative and programming consultant for the Positive Results Center.

17:09:52 Her book Reclaim UGLY (U.G.L.Y)-- Uplift Glorify Love Yourself and Create a World Where Others Can as Well, will be published by North American Press and distributed by Penguin Random House. Publication date to be determined.

17:10:12 So stay tuned for that. Ladies and gentlemen, and friends of all gens, please welcome Vanessa Rochelle Lewis. Vanessa, hi, thank you for being with us.

17:10:21 Hi, Tigress! Thanks for reading my longass bio. Well you got a lot of accomplishments and we have a lot of things to talk about.

17:10:29 We'll want to get started by hearing the story... Tell us what Reclaim UGLY is and tell us the backstory about how you came to initiate this movement.

17:10:41 Absolutely. Reclaim UGLY,

17:10:43 at its core, is a spiritual movement.

17:10:47 We are asking people to work together to uplift, glorify, love themselves, in spite of oppression,

17:10:59 in spite of violence, in spite of all the systems that get in the way. To center loving ourselves, so that we can create a world where everyone else can as well.

17:11:11 We're trying to eradicate lookism. We're trying to eradicate hatred. Our goal is to create a space where all the joyful weirdos can come and know that they are home and they are loved regardless of what they look like, who they desire, and even where they've

17:11:26 been.

17:11:29 Talk to me about lookism. What do we mean by that?

17:11:33 So, lookism is the way that we judge people based off of how they look. Literally, and simply, how they look. It is lookism. I like to think about lookism as like one of the last types of oppressions and discriminations that people talk about

17:11:51 or think about, one that people frequently forget to think about. Our eyes, for those of us who see, is our first senses and we have been trained, we have been taught,

17:12:00 we have been socialized to make judgments about people based off of how they look. And a lot of times we conflate those judgments with a person's value, with the person's character, or their morality.

17:12:14 We use our biases about bodies to validate who we're going to censor, who we are going to love, who we're going to create space for, and who we're going to exclude.

17:12:27 So, lookism, it's UGLY and and not the cute kind of UGLY that we're talking about, Reclaim UGLY. It's the kind of UGLY that causes a lot of harm and slips underneath the cracks. And the thing about lookism is that it is connected to

every

17:12:43 single kind of oppression. Lookism and racism, they're buddies. Lookism is an enabler. Listen, they go drinking together. Lookism and criminalization? Child, let's not even talk about it!

17:12:56 Those two are lying in the nastiest pit, making love, and hurting us all. Nobody asked for that, but it is already- Nobody asked for that. Nobody, nobody!

17:13:07 So I know that, um, I know the backstory of how you created Reclaim UGLY and I know it has a lot to do specifically with a nasty incident of lookism in your life. Would you tell us that story?

17:13:19 Absolutely. And I also want to say really quick right before I get into it. Lookism is something that we often weaponize against ourselves, just like uglification. We judge ourselves based off of how we look. Sometimes we say that, you know, we need

17:13:35 to lose a little bit of weight, or we need to add some makeup, or we need to dress differently in order to have access to opportunities. And when we say these things we're speaking from the wisdom of our lived experience in this society.

17:13:49 So it's not coming out of the blue if we struggle from lookism. It's very fair because of the world that we live in, but Reclaim UGLY believes that that does not have to be the world that we live in.

17:14:01 We're asking people to reclaim the parts of themselves that have been uglified, the parts of their identities, the parts of their beliefs, the way they see other people, that's connected to uglification so that we can imagine a world where all bodies

17:14:15 are welcome, safe and free.

17:14:18 And so now I'm going to get into your question, Tigress. Thanks for letting me do that little aside. So, so let's, let's do this real quick. Let's talk about Vanessa from one years old to five years old.

17:14:33 Vanessa from one to five was the baddest bitch walking.

17:14:37 My parents told me every day that I was the cutest, chocolatest, most adorable thing you could imagine. And everywhere I went I got love. (According to my parents. I barely remember).

17:14:51 Then something happened when I turned five years old. I went to school.

17:14:56 And there I learned that I lived in a body that other people did not think was beautiful. My first day of school, somebody looked at me and said, "Ewww! Why she look like that?"

17:15:07 the moment I walked into class, and that instant, almost, like, informed my life. I internalized that moment, and carried it with me for many many years, and I continue to be bullied because of the way that I look, not just my size but my skin color, specific

17:15:25 features like my forehead and the colors of my teeth, my weirdness, which we later learned was ADHD and autism, but also just like, I'm an artist and sometimes we're weird.

17:15:36 All of these traits were, were mashed together,

17:15:40 and, and treated like this monstrous being that I was. They literally would call me an African booty scratcher and this was other Black kids. So it really did come from a history of how not only Black people have been uglified, not only fat people,

17:15:58 have been uglified, but the ways locations are uglified, the ways physical features are uglified. So this is, like, Yeah, go ahead.

17:16:11 Say something about that. It is always amazing to me, the universal nature of that insult because you and I did not grow up in the same place, right? I grew up in Arizona. You grew up, I think, in California? South Central LA.

17:16:25 Right.

17:16:26 But everybody in everybody's Black neighborhood was calling somebody an African booty scratcher, or in some places African booty snatcher. I don't know, they're equally awful right? And they're, yeah, like you said, about locating ugliness in a particular

17:16:41 place, but I just don't know that that's like, that's actually an experience that, that's actually a specific terminology that lots of Black folks have experienced as part of uglified of dark skin or Black behaviors or anything that you know that,

17:16:57 from in community and from in community. And it's heartbreaking because, as a teacher, I meet people who were born after I was an adult who are still being called that. I've met teenagers that have been called African booty scratcher, young adults, and

17:17:14 it just really breaks my heart. And, you know, if we can add another aside that's part of the conversation of uglification, when we talk about uglification,

17:17:30 We are not talking about one privileged group uglifying a lesser privileged or more marginalized group. People, regardless of their lived experiences, uglify other people for multiple reasons, for power to make themselves feel better, to make themselves,

17:17:46 to create an insider group and an outsider group, to validate or justify some harmful behavior. There's so many reasons why we uglify people. Sometimes we uglify the people that have hurt us.

17:17:59 I remember this really painful experience of walking in on my housemate, who had treated me with so much love up to that point. They were on the phone with one of their cousins, and they were making fun of their cousin for being fat and having a fat lover

17:18:15 and discussing in gory nasty detail, like their fat sex, while I was cooking me and my fat lover dinner, you know, and when I tried to talk to them about it,

17:18:28 they justified it by saying how horrible their, this person was and listing all of the horrible things and I'm like, but what do those horrible traits have to do with their body, who they love, and how they make love. We uglify people in so many ways.

17:18:45 I was thinking recently about that movie,

17:18:48 Girls Trip with Queen Latifah and Tiffany Haddish. And so if you remember there was a moment when one of the characters partners husband was cheating with another woman, the darker skin woman in the show.

17:19:04 And when her feelings were hurt, her home girls gathered around to compare that other woman to a dog.

17:19:10 They didn't say anything about these people's characters, they didn't even talk about how her partner looked. They just bashed this other woman, and said that she was UGLY.

17:19:20 And that was power enough. There is a power to the word, UGLY, that I want people to understand and really, really think about who they think is UGLY, why they think someone is UGLY and what they do when they believe that.

17:19:34 Similarly, who we think is beautiful and why, how we treat them. But coming back to the story.

17:19:44 Yeah.

17:19:44 These are beautiful tangents and they are so important to the work that you do. So please, you know, we, we often have a nonlinear narrative on this show, so please feel free to tangent, wherever you want to and I will probably tangent you as well.

17:19:57 But yes, back to the story. The moment of, the particular moment of uglification that led to the Reclaim UGLY movement. So here we go.

17:20:07 And I'm gonna break the rules again and say, I moved to the Bay Area and Tigress, you, amongst other people, were actually a part of my healing journey. So I moved to the Bay Area convinced that I was UGLY based off of so much lived experiences, and it was

17:20:22 the burlesque dancers, the strippers that I saw that changed my life. At 21 I moved here and I saw all these fat, juicy, decadent women on stage bouncing and shaking and shaking and dancing and having folks throwing dollars at them and I'm like, they bodies

17:20:39 look like mine. Will people throw dollars at me?

17:20:43 Will they lust after me too? And it just did something. It opened up this crack that little me had and I started leaning into so much more self love and, and seeing myself as beautiful. But that, that idea was still dependent on somebody else validating my

17:21:02 beauty. So, time goes by, I get a little older, I have a few heartbreaks. I decide I need to heal and I get to a place in my life and my mid 30s, where I'm no longer concerned about who thinks I'm beautiful, or who doesn't.

17:21:16 I can care less. But I still like to show out, you know, I'm a Black person from LA. We gotta, you know, we like to look cute every now and then. So, you know, I went to this open, not an open mic, a book reading for a local poet, and I was dressed up in my

17:21:32 1920s gear. I had my feather on. I was so cute. I read a poem about my crush on Michelle Obama's feet. It was wonderful. And then the next day I signed on line and I saw that there was a picture posted of me, and I knew this picture was going to be a cute

17:21:50 picture of me and my Harlem Renaissance outfit but uh no, no it was not. It was a photo of 27 year old me, a community college teacher, standing in front of a half white chalkboard.

17:22:05 smiling, looking happy and cute and innocent and joyful in this photo, taken by one of my students. And this man, a party promoter from LA and the Bay Area, had uploaded it to make a point.

17:22:20 And the point was that women who looked like me were not welcome at after parties and VIP lounges hosted for rappers. The photo was like me looking for baddies. The type of women that respond, what's wrong with you all ladies? And it was a list of, it was a group of other women, mostly Black women, some non-black women, some men

17:22:52 who laughed about it, who cracked jokes about it, who liked it or hearted it. And I was enraged when that happened, like not hurt because I was just a little bit too old at this point to be too hurt by somebody calling me UGLY. I've been called UGLY way too many times. I'm like a little old, a little numb.

17:23:09 But I was enraged by this, and it took me a moment to think about all the reasons why I was enraged, but I moved from that anger and I messaged that man and I said, Why would you have my photo up like that?

17:23:23 And when he didn't respond, I messaged all the women that commented, and I

was like, I'm a real person. Why would you do this? For a while, none of these people responded, so I posted it on my Facebook page, and I got the baddest Facebook friends there

17:23:42 ever was. My Facebook friends are the shit. If you are watching this, Facebook friends, I love you. They had my back, man. They like, went to this person's page and they were like take this down, this is not okay.

17:23:57 How dare you? And it was so healing, because I don't have a lived experience of being stood up for when I was bullied as a kid. Very few other kids and adults stood up for me.

17:24:12 And there's a reason why a lot of people don't stand up to bullies, because they're afraid of being bullied themselves. It's part of why uglification works, you know. When people are uglified, when they're ostracized, they...

17:24:29 Yeah, when there's a good fight, they often experience ostracization and exclusion and pain and don't nobody want that for themselves. Nobody wants to experience how painful and horrible that feels so I just wasn't accustomed to being someone that folks

17:24:45 cared about like that. And to see that happen, it was just, it healed baby me in a really phenomenal way and it really empowered me. And it really motivated me to continue, to like, push for this photo to be removed.

17:25:01 So eventually this man wrote back to me and he told me a couple things. The first thing he told me was, he was sorry. He didn't realize that I was a real person.

17:25:12 And that's the thing to talk about when we talk about uglification because a lot of times uglification dehumanizes people; the people we make fun of especially when we just see a picture of them on the internet.

17:25:24 We don't think of them as a real person. When we see those pictures of people at Walmart or Walgreens or walking down the street, and we laugh at them and we crack jokes about them in memes, we're not thinking about a human being. But it is a human being

17:25:39 behind that photo and a human being who probably sees your meme. Many times a human being with children, friends, parents, that also sees that meme. My mom will tell you again and again, how much it has broken her heart to see the ways that people treated

17:25:58 her baby, how much pain she experiences as a parent. And even today watching the ways that I sometimes experienced violence in the world. So, you know, I saw this, I was mad.

17:26:12 I started thinking, Oh, this man is using my photo as a weapon. It's not even about me because he doesn't think I'm real. He's using my photo as a weapon to tell other people who don't fit into a specific standard of beauty, and we all have a general idea

17:26:27 of what that specific standard of beauty is because it's an Instagram model, it's an actress on TV, it's a news anchor. It's the beauty that we are taught to pursue without in regardless of whatever cultural group we, we live in, we know what the standards

17:26:39 of beauty are, just like we know what the standards of ugliness are, and he was using me as an example of standards of ugliness, and saying this is audacious.

17:26:54 And my heart broke, thinking about the young girls, young non binary people, the young fat people, the young dark skinned people, the young trans people, the the young people that would see this and A. think it's okay, or B,

think that they don't belong because

17:27:11 of how this photo was used. I also thought about adults who haven't been blessed to get the love, the affirmation, the nurture and the support to heal. Capitalism is a mother fucking bitch, and it is so hard to heal from trauma when you are working to survive

17:27:30 and you don't have a good support system. So I was like, outraged. And as we talked more, he also told me that not only did he think this photo wasn't real, 17:27:41 but he found this photo after googling UGLY Black women.

17:27:47 Wow, who Google's UGLY Black women. Who does that?

17:27:53 Like, in what world would somebody even want to do that? Well it turns out there's a lot of people who do it because at the time,

17:28:04 when you Google that, my photo was the second photo to pop up, and every other Black woman who popped up under UGLY Black women were all dark skinned. Every single one was a darker skinned Black woman.

17:28:18 Most of them were older, most of them were fat. Most of them were women who were in some sort of crisis, whether it was dealing with, like, you know, some struggle or houselessness.

17:28:30 You could see, you could see the wear and tear of, like an oppressive society. And so I started to think about, like when it comes to a uglification, usually the people that are uglified the most and that people getting away with uglifying them, are the people

17:28:44 who experienced the most oppression in other ways, the people that society has already kind of pushed under the rug or into the corner and said that we don't care about. And, and in my research, I'm going to flash forward just a little bit, but in my research

17:29:00 around uglification. What I have learned is the, the people.

17:29:06 There is, Black women and indigenous women

17:29:13 are the most missing women.

17:29:16 The most missing group of women in this country. We are missing.

17:29:21 A lot of times when we go missing,

17:29:25 we are not put on a list of people to search for. Folks don't look for who may have stolen us or kidnapped us. I guess they don't look for our killers. There was a Black man who was a serial killer who specifically targeted Black and Latinx sex workers

17:29:49 and shortly before he was killed by the state,

17:29:53 he confessed that he killed upwards of 100 women. I wish I remembered his name right now but he confessed that he killed upwards of 100 women, and most of these women were no one ever looked for them. No one ever thought to look for them,

17:30:09 because the world doesn't care about us in that way. And he knew it. He said, I chose these women because these were the women that I can get away with.

17:30:21 He also killed a number of Black and brown trans women. So, it speaks to who we uglify is also deeply connected to who we don't protect, who we ignore, who struggles the most with poverty and lack of resources and violence and abuse.

17:30:39 And that's what I saw reflected in that Google search. And so to go just a little bit deeper, my, my photos showed up on the Google search because another Black man wrote an article about why Black men should go to college, so that they can meet non Black

17:30:57 women. And he had all these photos of Black women that included me and Michelle Obama, as well as other famous dark skinned Black women, and he juxtaposed these pictures with scantily clad Asian, white and Latina women; women in like,

bathing suits and these

17:31:20 were models clearly photoshopped photos. And he said, why have this when you can have that and like, listed the desirability traits of those women, and that shit is also fucked up.

17:31:34 That is not a compliment or an affirmation. In this gaze, in this lens, all of us are being objectified by the lens of oppression.

17:31:45 All of us are being dehumanized, all of us are being hurt.

17:31:49 Uglification pits different people together for access to privilege.

Uglification tells us that we are beautiful when some other person decides that we were beautiful.

17:32:05 And so thinking about all of this, I decided I want to experience a world where no human being is called UGLY. I want to experience a world where people's faces and people's bodies

17:32:23 do not determine how they are treated by other people. And we know that you can go into a community of similar people, you can go into a queer or trans community where everyone may be queer and trans and some people are still going to be a uglified, while

17:32:43 other people are going to be glorified because of how they look. You can go into an all Black neighborhood or an all brown neighborhood and some people are going to be uglified. Some people are going to be saying, are going to be told, that they are

17:32:56 more this or less that. You could go into a family, and a child or a parent or a member of that family is going to be pressured to look a certain way, move a certain way, act a certain way, so that they can meet somebody else's standards of appropriate

17:33:13 or beautiful or good. And all of that is arbitrary. All of it is temporal and all of it is violent. What if, Tigress, as hard as it is, what if we were all inherently worthy of love?

17:33:32 It's simple, but it's so complex, you know, because of how we've been socialized to believe that we have to earn love or earn resources. Reclaim UGLY is asking, What if we're all worthy?

17:33:45 What if we all get treated with welcome in love? What if we all are protected? And that is this call to action? Oh, are you gonna ask something? I am so how, how did you get from having those feelings that sort of aspirational like, Ah, this world

17:34:04 where nobody is made to feel like this, to actually taking action? Because you,

17:34:10 a lot of us have that, like, wouldn't it be nice if we were just all nicer to each other? And then we just go back to doing the things we've been socialized to do.

17:34:18 So, how, what was it that unlocked action for you? And what were your first actions?

17:34:24 Oh, great. That's a really good question. I mean I think that I'm just a resilient ass person, like I just think that's literally a part of my characteristics, I think I had to become resilient

17:34:37 in order to survive some of the things that I've survived.

17:34:44 One, another thing is, I grew up with such a supportive mother, a mother who always pushed me to pursue my dreams, to honor my instincts.

17:34:58 And, and I named that because a lot of us don't have that, a lot of us don't have those parents that just love us unconditionally and push us, and so I

see that as a privilege in this world.

17:35:09 And I don't know if I would make the choices that I make today if I didn't have my mom's love and support.

17:35:15 The other thing is, I'm an Aries.

17:35:18 We jump sometimes and then are like, oh I don't know where I'm gonna land but I jumped.

17:35:25 I do that a lot.

17:35:26 But then the other thing is, is that I believe in this ship with my whole heart and soul, Tigriss.

17:35:36 I believe in it more than I believe in any other thing. I don't want other people to experience what I've experienced. I don't want violence to continue the way it does.

17:35:47 I want people to live better lives because I know that when we live better lives,

17:35:53 we're going to treat other people better. I believe that violence prevention doesn't have to be as hard or arduous or stressful, as it is. It, you know, just feels so simple to me, so I'm pursuing it, and I'm speaking it, hoping that other people see how

17:36:13 simple it is. It literally is a matter of thinking, this is how I want to move in the world. So this is how I'm going to move through the world if I'm going to live in a world where nobody is called UGLY or made to feel unwelcome.

17:36:30 I'm not going to call any person, UGLY. I'm not going to vote in a way that uglifies people. I am not going to give my money to groups and organizations that cause harm, because I don't believe in this. Because I believe in love and compassion,

17:36:48 I am going to make every choice possible to create a world that's rooted in love and compassion, and I know we can do this. We're in the middle of a pandemic.

17:36:57 We just watched the way that people radically transform their lives, because they wanted to be safe.

17:37:05 We stayed in our house for a whole year because we wanted to be safe. Colleges didn't always exist. Well, I mean, there are universities that did, but an MFA program did not always exist.

17:37:18 I went to an MFA program, and I read the writings, the novels and the poems of people who wrote before MFA programs existed.

17:37:27 We constructed something because we believed in it. So I know that if we believe in a world without uglification, If we believe in a world where everyone gets to reclaim the parts of themselves that have been uglified by oppression, we can create it.

17:37:45 it. Even if it's a group of five of us committed to doing this, we want to be one five sexy ass mother fuckers living a joyful life, but I know that it.

17:37:56 Sorry, what was the first group that you got together because you, you had this experience and you had this reaction. Yeah. And then what, and then what, what did you do? So then what I did was, I wrote an article about it on Facebook, and I posted it everywhere

17:38:11 and then I asked all of my editor, editor friends to publish it and they published it. And when that happened people started reaching out to me, a wide diverse and people of all different ethnic groups and backgrounds.

17:38:23 They were like, this touched me. And I was so inspired by it,

17:38:28 that I thought we need to do something about this. And my friend Mia

McKenzie, who runs BGD Press which used to be Black Girl Dangerous, had reached out to me at the same time and said Vanessa,

17:38:40 I have \$3,000. Do you want to use it to run a workshop? And I said, Yes, I want to do it to host a conference and she was like you can't host a conference with \$3,000, and I was like I'm from the streets girl, you know now what I can do with \$3,000.

17:38:56 Right. Watch me work.

17:38:58 That's right. And so we created, I lived in this small community space called Oakland Soul that has, like a kind of storefront that can fit about 50, 60 people.

17:39:10 And so we hosted this conference, and we brought, I brought in some local Fat and Disability Justice, and Transgender Justice Activists.

17:39:20 I brought in some Racial Justice Activists, and I just, like, announced it to whoever would listen all over the internet, sent it to a different, like, a couple of magazines or newspapers, nobody published it online

17:39:35 around newspapers. But folks came. We got a good 50 people who came, and it was 50 people of everyone, a few folks from NAAFA came, Terry, I think her name is Terry Weitz from NAAFA, came. You know, we had 17 year old gender queer teenagers that came.

17:39:53 We had people using mobility devices, people of every different age group, ethnicity group, gender identity. We were all there. And we were there all day. The conference started at ten and went to four. People didn't leave my house till two in the morning.

17:40:09 We partied hard, and it was such a good feeling. And what I realized was that this was the most intersection space I had been in. Not just diverse, but all of these people had the shared experience of being uglified and the structure of uglification

17:40:32 was similar regardless of the body or the lived experience. And not only did we all have this experience, but everyone there, without my pressure, was committed to being kind to each other,

17:40:48 having grace for each other, being compassionate for each other. So that energy that sometimes happens when you're in a diverse space where people are defensive or easily offended or easily offend. That didn't really happen.

17:41:03 We were just lovey dovey and vulnerable and real and honest, and it was messy and clumsy. I had never organized something like that before. But we walked away happy.

17:41:17 And I was like, this is the happiness that happened there wasn't about us talking about this thing. It was about the fact that we were all committed to creating space for each other.

17:41:28 We all want it to be included amongst each other. And so I think the reason why I call Reclaim UGLY, a spiritual movement, instead of an organization is because we're not here to, like, spread new language.

17:41:43 We're not here to deconstruct. There's so many activists, feminist, academics who are doing that. We are simply here to create a space where people who have been uglified by other folks can come and experience what it's like to not be uglified, to simply

17:41:58 be loved and welcomed because they are effing valuable, and we need them and we want to have a good time with them. I am tired of us fat people, folks that the world calls UGLY, disabled people, constantly trying to validate our humanity to people who are

17:42:15 committed to judging us. We don't need those people who want to hurt us, we got each other. And we can treat each other good, and when we do treat each other good we create a paradise.

17:42:27 And I want that paradise.

17:42:31 I want us to have that paradise. Yeah.

17:42:38 Let's, I just want to let folks who are here with us live, know that if you want to start putting questions into the chat, we'll be able to take a few questions from our audience for Vanessa.

17:42:48 While folks are gearing up to do that.

17:42:51 Vanessa, what, what's Reclaim UGLY doing now? You had this amazing first conference with 50 or so people in the Bay Area. And then, now, what are y'all up to?

17:43:06 We were up to some really cute things so as a team we've been meeting pretty regularly, getting to know each other. We just had this super fun pool party where we were all like cute and adorable and chubby and in our bikinis having fun and connecting, but

17:43:23 part of why we're connecting is we're getting to know each other, so that we can have a sustainable movement, so we can be like y'all Tigress and say one day, we're 52 years old.

17:43:35 We're 152 years old. Bow down...

17:43:40 You know, um, and, and part of why we're moving so slow and focusing so much on connection is because what we have learned from our movement ancestors and even contemporary movement organizing, is that when your focus is on an outcome, 17:43:57 when you're, when you're constantly rushing, when you're, when you're urging, you're moving urgently,

17:44:03 you splinter, you break down, you fall apart. We cannot function like that. So we're trying to figure out how to make this sustainable and move at the pace of pleasure.

17:44:14 Everyone on our team is disabled. We're intergenerational. We have all been uglified. We all have trauma. We all have pain, that's real, so slowly being with each other, we meditate together every morning.

17:44:28 We have meetings and we try to figure it out and how to work in a way that's serving us.

17:44:34 And we do have some things coming up. Starting May 30, we are launching a bi-weekly spiritual service with other community partners, called In Solidarity, no, In Solidarity late.

17:44:53 Oh no, In Solidarity with Liberation.

17:44:57 No liberation, in solid, in solid.

17:45:01 Oh I can't remember, I gotta pull it up real quick. It's so many different words. But it's a service. Good words!

17:45:06 I know some really good words. Any combination of those words sounds like a good kind of service to me. Here we go, Solidarity and Liberation. That's what it is, Solidarity and Liberation. And so this is a biweekly service for people who want to gather around the fact

17:45:23 that liberation is a spiritual thing. And we need to learn how to work in solidarity in order to have the world that we want. Because if we can't figure out how to collaborate with each other,

17:45:36 we are never going to achieve the liberation we deserve. So we want to slow down and really create a space for people to come together and practice, explore, talk about, experience,

17:45:48 solidarity from a spiritual lens. We also are launching what our team calls RULU.

17:45:56 RULU, Come on Tigress. When I say RU, you say LU. RU...LU! There you go.

17:46:04 RULU stands for Reclaim UGLY Liberation University and so there's some courses that we're going to be offering through Reclaim UGLY Liberation University. Our soft launch starts this summer.

17:46:15 And one of the first courses that's coming up is Unpacking and Healing From Lookism, and we're really going to understand how lookism works, study it, explore it in our lives, in our bodies, and really think together. What does it mean to create a world,

17:46:34 or communities or spaces or even personal relationships with ourselves, where we recognize when lookism is happening? And we create strategies to heal from lookism. And I'm so excited about this course. There's a few other courses that will be offered.

17:46:51 One that I'm also super excited about is the,

17:46:57 oh, it's, it's basically, of the, the Liberation of Romantic Self Love, where I will be facilitating an experience where people get to fall in love with themselves,

17:47:15 negotiate conflict with themselves, court themselves, get to know themselves with the same passion and fervor that they might get to know a potential partner. And move through all the shit that we might move through with a potential partner, so that we

17:47:30 can, like love ourselves for real, for real in community. And I know that like, self love is a very nuanced and complicated time for a lot of people. A lot of folks feel pressure to practice self love, but I believe that in order to have the resilience to

17:47:52 navigate coalition building, and all the hardness that comes because we are going to say, I'm sorry friend that was racist, I'm sorry friend that was transphobic,

17:48:04 I'm sorry friend this thing you did harmed me, in order to have the resilience to face that, to deal with that in a way that is appropriate and that is compassionate. You have to be able to love yourself.

17:48:18 You cannot be a racial justice advocate if you do not love yourself.

17:48:24 You cannot go up against the patriarchy in a way that is meaningful and in a way that is not going to harm your collaborators, if you do not have a self love practice. Tigress, you asked me, like what did, what was it that, like helped me to do that?

17:48:39 I love the shit out of myself so much that a hater will call me narcissist, and that's fine because I know what it's like to not like myself. So let them call me names, like I'm committed to loving me, and by loving me with this much fierceness, I am better

17:48:57 able to love people from a liberatory standpoint, to have grace and compassion. Well, I love the idea of adding romanticizing or like romancing yourself to the practice of self love.

17:49:14 You know I think a lot about the ways that we put things on hold because we are waiting for some kind of romantic love in our lives. And I think about the ways that we, that, that that is connected to uglification and specifically to anti-fatness.

17:49:29 You know we hear from people all the time that they thought they couldn't be loved unless they lost weight, and they don't mean they didn't think their mom

could love them.

17:49:37 Sometimes they mean that, right, but I didn't think my grandpa or my mom or my school teacher or whatever, but a lot of times what they meant was, I don't think I can find a romantic partner in the body that I have now so I have to lose weight. And culturally,

17:49:49 that's affirmed all the time.

17:49:52 And so the idea of like what, what if I just have a romance with myself, you know. I got fancy for today. I told Vanessa, I'm so glad she is teaching us all about not uglifying folks because I'm not going to be fancy for every single webinar we ever

17:50:08 do for NAAFA.

17:50:09 And I actually think it's important to be visibly plain sometimes, like in my Instagram, I post pictures of myself where I'm not fancy, not, you know. I think Sonia Renee Taylor used to do a thing called Bad Picture Monday.

17:50:25 This is how we're showing up today.

17:50:30 Okay? How I showed up today is in a dress that I bought, and I had in mind that, like this would be a good date dress. And then I was like, I'm not going on no dates right now, but this dress doesn't have to hang in my closet until I'm going on a date.

17:50:42 Right? And so that, that sort of practice of just, like you know, I can do these.

17:50:50 I can do these, like, really nice things for myself, I don't have to wait for somebody else to do them. That's right. And here's another thing, like everything you said, I just like affirm, affirm, affirm, and a thing that I've noticed in my own experience,

17:51:04 and in the experiences of people I've watched, in particular, survivors, other fat folks, other folks who've been deeply uglified. We think that if we learn to love ourselves that way, we will get a payoff, in the love from somebody else. Like, once

17:51:24 I really love myself, other people will see how lovable I am, and they will love me. But what if that is not the goal. How do we remove that from the goal?

17:51:36 Because we're still trying to do this thing where we're buying somebody else's love through a behavior. What if you are inherently lovable? Even if you don't like yourself, even if you don't love yourself in this moment, you are still fucking lovable.

17:51:51 Someone will love you. They might not be who you want to love you.

17:51:55 But somebody loves you, period, point blank, right now, and it probably might not even be how you want to be loved. It doesn't negate the love.

17:52:06 And here's the other thing: we see people who are in intimate relationships, we see people who have bodies that the world desires, and that doesn't mean that they have the self love to be resilient in the face of pain or violence.

17:52:25 I sit and think about I can't remember her name is Anna Nicole, and it just really struck me because Anna Nicole's suicide happened when I was a teenager. Do we remember Anna Nicole? You know, and I remember I used to watch her, and she was slut shamed horribly,

17:52:41 body shamed horribly, but I would watch her and think this woman is so gorgeous. Phyllis Hyman, so gorgeous. Like all of these people, so gorgeous, and yet still,

17:52:55 they didn't make it in this world, and we know that, like how we look has absolutely nothing to do with our resilience, or how people ultimately treat us. We just use our appearance to justify, validate, set blame, but we all experience cruelty and

17:53:30 all experience love. But how do you have a relationship with yourself, that you are choosing the love that feels good to you at all times? That's my standard. I am not interested in how much somebody loves me, worships me, adores me.

17:53:36 I am interested in how I feel, in relationship to the people around me and the environment that I am in.

17:53:44 Do I feel free? Do I feel safe? Do I feel like I can be my whole ass self, gross and pink gossamer wings and fly in backflips? If I do because that's what I want to do, then I'm like this is good and this is gravy and that's what I'm really interested

17:54:01 in, like supporting people to, like not try to validate themselves through love, through beauty, through physical fitness than anything else, but simply to believe that they are worthy and make choices that are rooted in that truth.

17:54:20 Not everybody is worthy of us.

17:54:23 Not everybody is worthy of us.

17:54:28 So, um, so audience we still have time for a couple of more questions from y'all.

17:54:35 Vanessa, I noticed that you do talk about people being cute and adorable. Oh yeah.

17:54:42 Um, do you think that we should just not comment on physical appearance? Like when you say something is cute, do you only mean, like its energy or do you, is it,

17:54:52 Do you still think about physicality in terms of beauty? Yes, absolutely.

So my relationship to beauty has shifted and has changed. What I try to move away from is external ideas of what is beautiful, what I've been taught to perceive as

17:55:13 beautiful and what I've been taught not to perceive as beautiful. But instead, to really think about how something impacts me. One of my favorite moments in literature is from *The Color Purple*.

17:55:26 When Sug, when Sealy asks, Sug, do you believe in God?

17:55:32 And then Sealy takes Sug on a walk, and they see this little purple flower and Sug, Sealy said, Sug says that flower is God, enjoying that flower is God.

17:55:49 And I think of that as beauty.

17:55:52 You know, we get to enjoy beauty. There's so much beauty all around us, but we get to decide how we perceive and experience beauty. So my chubby arms, for me, is beautiful.

17:56:07 And this is what I think is beautiful about it. Look at how I can move it around. Look at how comforting and putty it is. Look at the different colors that it makes as I move it around.

17:56:19 What happens when I shake it? That's beautiful. You know what else is beautiful and I'ma be just a little bit nasty. If you are uncomfortable with nastiness, I'm kind of sorry but not fully.

17:56:30 So I also have those chubby thighs. And all I gotta say is, I never have to buy a vibrator. All I gotta do is juggle my thighs; something magical is happening.

17:56:48 If you don't have chubby thighs, you can do what I do. That's beautiful. You know what I mean. So, like for me, beauty is just like indulging in the bliss

and the pleasure. It is not an assessment.

17:56:58 Maybe that's the difference. I think that a lot of people treat beauty as an assessment. Do you meet the standard of beauty for me is just like, let me indulge in the pleasure that is you,

17:57:10 that is me, that is around us.

17:57:14 So I just want to share something that popped up in the chat. Vanessa, no question, but I just want to say your joy and energy is just infectious. Thank you for sharing it with us. Thank you, Amanda.

17:57:30 Followed by another comment that says, A dynamic and joyous person;

17:57:36 that is a beautiful person. Absolutely. Absolutely, I agree.

17:57:42 You know, I just, I just think that there's so much beauty in all of us and I love it. And I also love the idea in these last three minutes, I'm just, let's talk about ugliness too, like, I also like, I identify as gorgeous but I also identify as UGLY for

17:58:00 two reasons. One, I want the world to acknowledge that we have UGLY standards.

17:58:07 And we treat people a certain way because of it. So I will constantly call myself that as long as those standards exist, but when I call that, I also feel like I am claiming freedom from the patriarchy.

17:58:23 I don't care about your pretty, your beauty, your cute, your morality if not fitting into those standards means UGLY. I claim, UGLY, because I give no fucks. That is violent, that is painful.

17:58:38 That doesn't serve me, you or anybody else. So if that's what UGLY is, I'll take it baby, freedom from all that bull.

17:58:51 We've got a comment I want to share: UGLY is a sense of freedom in terms of not pleasing those who don't deserve to be pleased.

17:58:59 Danielle better speak. It is very similar to the reason that so many of us in fat liberation movement and fat activism are so committed to using the word fat instead of using euphemisms. I love euphemisms for fat.

17:59:12 I think they're, you know, fun and creative and playful language sometimes and whatever.

17:59:17 But we, we have a strong commitment, I personally have a strong commitment and NAAFA as an organization has a strong commitment to using the word fat. You know there have been points in NAAFA's history where we've talked about, the organization has talked

17:59:30 about not using that word, because it would be more accessible to people who are afraid of that word, or taken more seriously by people who think that word can only be used in insulting ways.

17:59:42 And I will promise you all that as long as I'm the Chair of NAAFA, the word fat will continue to be included in the organization's name. And I think that we are, you know shaping a membership and building on a movement where we'll continue to use that

17:59:56 word.

17:59:57 And we're so happy to be in partnership with you doing the same thing around the word UGLY. Oh, thank you, Tigress. It's such an amazing transformation of, of how people use that language.

18:00:12 So remind us again.

18:00:14 Where can people find you or Reclaim UGLY if they want to see more of your work and more of these upcoming projects that you all have.

18:00:23 They can go to www.ReclaimUGLY.org; www.ReclaimUGLY.org. They can

follow me on Instagram, at: the dot UGLY dot Black dot woman dot. Please don't send me no message on Instagram telling me I'm not UGLY and to charge money.

18:00:48 I'm so tired of those messages, I know they gonna keep coming. Don't do it.

18:00:52 You can also follow us on Facebook, Reclaim UGLY on Facebook. You can Google it. It's all out there. We are looking for members, we are looking for volunteers, we are looking for donators, donators, donors.

18:01:09 We are just looking. Come be with us, come parlay with us, come be free with us.

18:01:15 If you think I'm cute, holla.

18:01:17 And then if we continue following Vanessa on Reclaim UGLY. And when they have a new updated publication books, publication date for her book, we'll be able to know that. Yes, and there's so many other like, really talented people at Reclaim UGLY. So we have

18:01:34 a Reclaim UGLY digest, and you can read some of people's writings. We're about to put up a bunch more writings on the website. Members of our team are working on a Reclaim UGLY zine all around sexual liberation and thinking about like sex and pleasure and kink through

18:01:52 the lens of uglification and Reclaiming UGLY. So there's just some really juicy stuff happening. Thank you, Darliene.

18:02:05 Vanessa is getting comments about being cute in the chat.

18:02:12 It's not,

18:02:12 it's not, the thighs until after the webinar.

18:02:18 Thank you so much for being with us today. I want to let everyone know as you are celebrating Fat Liberation Month with us, Vanessa has teamed up with NAAFA for Reclaim UGLY and NAAFA to sponsor a day of fat self care. And in partnership with with artist

18:02:36 Catherine Hack who is also a member of the NAAFA Board of Directors. So stay tuned for more information about that coming soon. Once again you can find all of the other Fat Liberation Month events listed on the naafa.org website just click the Fat Lib Month

18:03:05 tab and there's a calendar of events there, including registration buttons. We are quickly adding registration for all the upcoming events but you can register now for the other two that are this week. Once again, that's Phiip Barragan of Fatizen graphic

18:03:24 novel on Friday. And Bree16 of healedAF doing Fat Magic and Taro on Saturday. We look forward to seeing you at those events and lots of other future events. Thank you so much once again to the team at Pro Bono ASL for providing interpreting for us

18:03:30 today.

18:03:32 Again, their website is probonoasl.com and,

18:03:38 and of course, we are able to bring these kinds of activities to you at no cost, through the generous, generous support of fat community and allies who provide funding to NAAFA. If that's something that you can help us with, please do go to our website and click on the Contribute button so that you can help us continue to offer this kind of programming at no charge to community. Thank you, Vanessa Rochelle Lewis. Thank you. Thank you, Tigress, you did such a good job. Thank you, Happy Fat Liberation month, everyone! See you next time. Happy Fat Liberation Month everyone! Bye!