

Our Joy Is Our Rebellion

High Elevation Colorado Kink 2025 Keynote

September 14, 2025

Presented by Tomo

Greetings. Thank you to the Producers of High Elevation Colorado Kink for inviting me to speak today and to all of you for being here and listening. It's always wonderful to be back with the Colorado community. I feel so welcome every time I'm here, and you all know how to have a good time.

This has been a truly joyful weekend. It's been a pleasure to witness and celebrate the Rocky Mountain Person of Leather Contest, and I want to thank the entire team whose hard work and heart made this space possible for all of us as well as Voodoo Leather Works for hosting us.

It's important to me to begin as I do every class and every speech I present with a land and labor acknowledgment, to name and contextualize the history of this country and this land, as a gesture of respect and reparation.

I am speaking to you as an uninvited guest on the land of the Cheyenne, Ute, and Lipan Apache people. I live on the land of the Nisenen people on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, about halfway between what is known today as Sacramento and Lake Tahoe, California – the area where gold was first

“discovered”, fueling the theft and colonization of this unceded land from its ancestral stewards.

I grieve this atrocity, as well as the ongoing systematic harm to all the Indigenous cultures of what we now call North America.

The original tribal families have yet to recover from the near genocide of their people, and their story continues to be excluded from history. Yet contemporary communities of Indigenous people still work to protect the ecosystem of their ancient homes, care for their tribal members, and ensure the preservation of their cultures.

I also recognize that much the infrastructure and economy of the United States was built at the expense of stolen and forcefully enslaved Black people as well as Latinx, Asian, and other immigrant workers who faced brutal conditions in agriculture, railroads, and industry.

It is important for us to realize that much of what we identify as “American culture” stems from generations who endured the horror of slavery followed by dehumanization of segregation which brings us to the racist waters that we all swim in today.

Land and Labor Acknowledgements are often seen as performative, and if you only say the words, they are. Please take the time to learn more from, and about, marginalized members of our community, their histories and their cultures; and

how you can share your resources in support and solidarity in the fight for equity. Don't just say the words, please join me in doing the work together.

People often ask me why I offer these acknowledgements. I use those opportunities to explain that there was a day that I didn't know what a land acknowledgement or labor acknowledge was and perhaps some of you in this room are hearing it for the first time. In the words of Maya Angelou, "when we know better, we do better."

So let us hold this remembering gently. Not as a weight that keeps us in sorrow, but as a truth that teaches us how to live, how to gather, how to choose joy even when joy is threatened. To honor the past is also to honor our responsibility to the present, and our pathway to love and community.

That's why I begin here, as a first step into my speech today because when we breathe together in truth, we can breathe together in joy. And when we breathe together in joy, we are already in rebellion.

So, let's begin with a breath together. A breath to arrive. A breath to remember why we are here gathering together. A breath to hold each other as we navigate the fear of our current times. A breath to honor those who aren't with us, because of hate, because of hardship, and because the world has never made it easy for us to live loudly in our truth. This weekend, we gather in celebration. We also gather in defiance.

Today, I'll share a story. Not just my own, but ours. The story of how joy lives alongside grief, how leather and kink communities gather in resistance, and how choosing connection is one of the most radical acts we can commit to.

I'll invite you to remember where we've been, to look with clear eyes at where we are now, and to imagine what it means to keep showing up in your boots, in your leather, and in your truth as a form of rebellion.

So, refresh your coffee and settle in. We're going to talk about sorrow, yes. But mostly, we're going to talk about love. About joy. About how we keep each other going, even when the world would rather we disappear.

Because when we show up in our boots and collars and glitter and leather and gear, when we stomp and cruise and kneel and kiss and serve and strut, we are engaging in a powerful act of resistance.

We are choosing joy.

In a world where joy is being stolen, criminalized, legislated out of existence, and transformed into fear and terror for black and brown people, for queer people, for immigrants, and for trans people, joy is no small thing.

Our joy is our rebellion, and this is the title of my speech today.

It's not new. This isn't the first time we've had to fight for space to breathe, to gather, and to love. Marginalized people have always been targeted, and we've had to carve out spaces for our lives with our own hands.

I think about the bars that have been raided. The lovers who have been arrested. The pronouns stolen. The jobs lost. The families, defined as we define family, broken apart. The times I've been chased out of a women's bathroom and even had the police called to remove me. The bodies brutalized because they were too black, too femme, too butch, too nonconforming, too free.

And yet we are here.

We are here because in the words of queer author and activist Autumn Brown "I will love anyway. I will build anyway. I will find my people, and we will dance in the wreckage."

Our survival is not quiet. It is not only built in marches and policy and protest. It is built in love letters. It is built in a Bootblack's chair. In dungeons and workshops and hotel hallways where someone looks you in the eye and says,

"I see you. You belong."

I remember being in my 20s, living in New York, piling into buses on early mornings to begin a very long day with other activists, sleepy yet full of fire. We headed to D.C., ready to march, to stomp, and scream. We walked for hours through the streets, yelling until our voices cracked, holding our hand-made signs high. We ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches we had packed because none of us could afford the food vendors, and we slept curled up on the ride home, exhilarated and exhausted.

Forty years later, my activism looks different, but it's just as loud. My body no longer has the endurance for miles of marching, but I still stand on the corner in my small town with a sign in my hands beside my wife, my son, his partner and my grandchildren, making our voices heard.

I write. I speak. I try to inspire. I refuse to stay home, even when the pull of soft blankets and binge-watching TV feels inviting and strong. I continue to produce events in an uncertain world, where my new edge play is financial risk. We do what we can, where we can. And every act of showing up, in joy, in defiance, in community, **is rebellion.**

Here's the thing: rebellion is not only fighting back against what harms us. It is also fiercely choosing what feeds us.

It is saying, "I will not give you my joy."

Not when you pass bills that say our kids don't get to learn about us. Not when you try to legislate our bodies, criminalize our gender, and erase our histories. Not when you strip healthcare, when you close safe spaces, and when you demand we hide.

We will not hide.

Because every joyful black, brown, trans, kinky and queer life is a slap in the face to fascism.

Each of us living fully and freely is a disruption to patriarchy.

Every one of us who gathers here in our leather and boots and lace and chain and denim and heels and bare skin and bound hearts says:

You cannot take this from us.

Imagine someone brand new walking into a leather event for the first time. Their movement is tentative. Their boots are polished, but not yet broken in. They stand by the wall, scanning the room with that nervous look of someone asking: “Will I be welcome here? Will I fit in? Will I be safe here? Will I be seen? Will I be loved?”

And then someone approaches them, smiles and says, “Hey, come sit with us.” And a Bootblack shows them how to shine their boots until they could see their own strength reflected back. And someone else listens and holds them as they manage their emotions in realizing they found their home in the leather community. And by the end of the weekend, they aren’t just walking through the space, they belong in it.

That’s what we do.

We don’t just build events. We build community.

We create culture in the cracks between oppression.

We create chosen family when bloodlines have betrayed us.

We give each other the tools to feel beautiful, desired, and worthy when the world tries to say that we are not.

At a time when we are under attack, we need each other more than ever. However, when we can't reach the halls of power with our rage, it's often too easy to turn that anger toward each other and toward the leaders within our own community, because they're close, because they're visible, because we can.

But this is exactly the moment when we must resist that urge. What we need now is not less generosity, but more. Not less gratitude, but more. Not less compassion, but more. Not less love, but more. We must hold each other closer, comfort one another fiercely, and stand stronger together because the world is already trying to tear us apart. We don't need to do that work for them.

That is revolution.

Sometimes people talk about joy like it's a break from the work. But I don't think that's right. Joy *is* the work. It is hard-won. It's sacred and it's ours.

I'm not talking about toxic positivity. I'm not talking about denying grief or rage or fear or exhaustion. Those are here too. But we don't live in our pain alone. We carry the load together as a community. We transform it. We wrap it in leather and carry it to the dungeon and fuck until it is out of us and we exit the dungeon with our heads held high.

Our joy is reclamation.

As we come together this weekend to witness and celebrate the Rocky Mountain Person of Leather Contest, let's remember the founding mission of Person of Leather - to promote and celebrate the diversity of Leather Culture throughout our Community. We come together not only to be a part of this contest but to stand together, to support diversity and visibility, to party together, play together and be our full authentic selves, together.

Gathering like this, in person, with all our glorious queerness, deviance and desire is in itself an act of rebellion.

As we move in community, *especially now*, I encourage us to thank our producers who create space for us and take on far more liability than most realize in order to do that work.

Thank our leaders who are able to be out and loud and speak for us.

Thank our educators who create classes and teach us.

In a time when they want us isolated, we choose connection and our leaders help us do that. When they try to ban our books, we tell our stories louder. When they close our clubs and cancel our drag shows and say our families aren't real, we kiss our lovers harder, raise our children braver and stand even taller.

Coming together matters. It has always mattered. And it matters especially now.

The attacks are real. The hate is rising. And I don't need to tell you what that feels like.

But let me remind you what *this* feels like.

Right now.

All of us in this room. Our community. This courage. This joy.

This is what they cannot steal.

Leather is not just something we wear. It is service to one another. It is a commitment. It is a lineage. It is a love letter to every queer elder who made space for us to exist.

When we gather in our leathers, when we kneel in our protocols, when we serve and sweat and shine and fuck, we are preserving something precious. Something old and yet ever-changing.

When we build a table with a seat for everyone, when we create space that welcomes everyone, **every one**, and not only opens the door but embraces, that is leather, that is community and that is the best of us.

We hold space for one another, we stand with each other, we continue to live authentically in our power and exactly how we choose to live.

And. That. Terrifies. Them.

Let it.

So, what do we do?

We keep building spaces. We keep gathering. We care for ourselves when it just gets too hard. We keep loving. We keep learning each other's names. We check on our friends. We protect our people. We speak our truth. We vote. We march. We rest. We play. We celebrate.

We live.

Fully. Fiercely. Unapologetically.

So today, wear your leather. Serve your Dominant. Hold your lover. Touch your community. Eat. Laugh. Dance. Be exactly who you are. Because in this world, where they are trying to erase us, we will not have it.

Our joy is our rebellion.

Thank you for spending this time with me today.