FREEDOM, FAILURE, AND REBELLION: The Queer Art of Being a Fat, Mexican Chichona

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I come from a long line of fat Mexican chichonas. My great grandmother was Manuela. She had a garden with jasmine in it, sewed all her own clothes, and was devoted to the Virgen of Guadalupe. Manuela begat Esperanza (or Pelancha or Chata). She is short, fair-skinned, the mother of two daughters, way into Jesus, from Monterrey, loves chocolate, and whenever we go to aquariums she gets very hungry for seafood. Esperanza begat Maria (or Nelly), the younger daughter. She can draw anything just by looking at it, hates looking at photographs of herself, and is missing one of her front teeth. And Maria begat me, Virginia (or Vickie, Rocky, Reina, or most recently Virgie). I'm a mildly pocha, severely over-educated writer who likes truffle oil and menudo.

Legend has it that after I was born I slept for three days. On the third day, when my mother was discharged from the hospital, we all piled into a 1979 yellow pinto and headed to get Chinese food. It is said that the moment I smelled the takeout I awoke. Legend also has it that our allegiance switched from the Virgen to the Prince of Peace when my great grandfather, Ricardo, asked a Pentecostal healer passing through Monterrey to return his blind brother's eyesight and he did. From that day forward he became a preacher for the Assembly of God.

And all of this is how I became a fat Mexican chichona Christian who later rebelled, became a feminist, a fat activist, and a femme who started writing

about God and Jesus as manifestations of heteropatriarchal colonialism. I remain fat through the entirety of this series of wondrous events.

I lived a very long time with the belief that my body was my enemy. As a woman, this was part of my cultural inheritance. I was raised by Mexican immigrants, my mother's people. At church I was the only fat brown girl. They had words for the hate they had for my fat, but not for the hate they had for my brownness.

I was part of the Missionettes, who were something like Girl Scouts for Jesus. The badges I earned for my pink sash were for beauty and cleaning and service. We spent evenings talking about Diet Pepsi and the shapes of our faces, the color palettes that best suited our skin tones, and the husbands we would have in the future. I watched cartoons and read books about a love that my body disqualified me for; even though I didn't know the exact language, I learned that Fat, Mexican, and Female made up who I was. Who I was became my greatest shame. I knew that being fat was bad, but it wasn't until much, much later that I would have the words to know that I had been taught that being a woman and being brown were very bad too.

I have learned over a lifetime of lessons about feminine beauty that fatness is an act of feminine failure. I am fascinated by failure. To me, it is a deeply political, deeply subversive act. Earlier this year I wrote: "To be fat is to experience the freedom that marginality—failure—gives me: the freedom from the tyranny of straight life, freedom from the suffocation of externally determined success, freedom to push the envelope, the conversation, to hike up my skirt, to see the futility of apology, to sweat and love and fuck the way that rebels do."

I remember as a child, during recess, my friends often wanted to enact the white heterosexual romances we read about in books. I always played the boy roles. I remember the envy and the shame of my largeness. I wasn't dainty or frail. I can remember the feeling of desire—the heat and swelling at the back of my mouth, the feeling I still get when I silence myself—to "play" the girl, but I was always the husband or the boyfriend. So complete was my resignation that I never even asked if I could play the girl part. I knew, with a resolute thoroughness, that those roles were reserved for the "real" girls. Now, when I think back on that time I imagine that most of the skinny girls I knew felt like failures, too, because none of us were white.

My mother used to ask me what my favorite color was: "Blue," I responded. She had me when she was twenty. She loved to make her own clothes, alter things, make skirts shorter and then add buttons and lace, just the way I do now. She loved pink, and once or twice when I was younger she'd ask if I liked something pink. "I hate pink!" I remember the anger and incredulity I felt. Pink signified all that I was not. It was a shy and vulnerable wish. It was visibility: a proclamation of femininity I felt I had not earned. Pink felt like drag, like a lie, like a foreign place to which I was not allowed citizenship. It represented all the things about femininity I had failed to achieve because I was fat.

Even though I didn't have the language to describe it, I felt the nameless sense of not belonging with a sharp clarity that was painful and confusing. Because I was big (the territory of maleness), I was being pushed out of the gender I was supposed to be, the only place I'd ever known. I didn't feel like a boy, but I knew I wasn't really a girl either. I didn't realize this until years later. During a seminar in graduate school I was asked to create a gender timeline that tracked my life in terms of gender from start to finish. At first, I presumed

my timeline would be a straight line with two points: "born female/girl" and "still female/woman." As I gave the assignment more consideration I began to break the timeline with notches where I wrote "non-girl." There were entire periods of my life where I felt like this, most of them during years considered formative to gender identity. I think that these gender non-conforming years in my childhood were incredibly influential in how I would perform gender as a grown-up.

I was perilously close to living life on the straight and narrow at the age of twenty, but a voiceless impulse compelled me to pick myself up out of the rural, stiflingly picturesque dreariness of Davis, California (where I'd been attending university), and return to the Bay Area, where I grew up—to UC Berkeley, in fact. It was this point in the story that I locate the change. I met women with hair on their legs, who used words like "patriarchy," and who introduced me to Audre Lorde. In the midst of my apostasy—having recently abdicated my patronizing Missionettes sash of Diet-Pepsi-loving-wifehood and repudiated my deeply religious upbringing, even leaving my post as the only Sunday School teacher who didn't teach toddlers about hell—I was an enthusiastically willing convert to radical feminism. I was introduced to the phrase "body image" and learned about the arbitrary and ridiculous standards to which women were expected to adhere. There was a lot of crying, writing in journals, drawing of my vagina, and rage-filled rants about oppression, another word I was introduced to at Berkeley.

About five years passed. I became a sex educator and decided to stop dieting, got a master's degree, became a fat activist, and wrote a book. I taught physics and art and English at a school for unwed mothers, acquitted gun runners, and beautiful black closeted drag queens who got into scratching fights with white boys and were expelled. I quit teaching, had a radio show, met the boy

of my dreams, traveled to Australia, New Zealand, the Cook Islands (where everyone is what Americans call fat), and fell in love with Thailand and the baby tigers that crawled on my head at the Buddhist sanctuary outside Bangkok. Between graduating and discovering something called "femme," I lived a lot actually.

But back to femme.

Someone asked me recently while on a panel at a conference what femme means/is/does. I came up with a horrible answer because that's the thing about femme: it's beyond the scope of encapsulatability, illegible. Femme is "she" and "he" and "here" and "them," screaming queens and bejeweled chubsters. Someone told me that femme was failure: failure to meet expectations, failure to succeed at being a woman, to be grotesque and beautiful, to be queer and fat. It's fierce and it's vulnerable. It's odd and revolutionary and it means lots of things. A lot of people—including the people I danced burlesque with, the boy of my dreams, the queers I have been fortunate to know who saved my life and always, always somehow found space for my fat brown awkward ass in their hearts and their boudoirs—taught me about femme, welcomed me into femme, said I had a place when I was sure I didn't. They showed me how to *work it*. They taught me that everything is better with glitter and a fake bird on it. They taught me how to make things that were made for skinny people into things that could be for me.

My body means a lot of things to a lot of different people. It makes some people angry and others inspired. It is a symbol that I've reinterpreted. It is feminine resistance. It is an outlaw body that refuses legibility. My body says "fuck you" to the rules of thincentric WASP respectability. My body is my birthright, one in a legacy of fat Mexican chichonas who laugh and suck the

marrow out and who put cream cheese in tortillas and call them "softly cheese taquitos." So if my jiggle makes you uncomfortable, you better get yourself some new progressive politics because my body is here and it's queer and it's not going anywhere, mija.