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Chubby Thighs & Short Skirts: On Race, the Fat Body and
the Feminine

By: Virgie Tovar

One of my first life lessons in the fundamentals of being a girl was that I was supposed to keep my legs closed at all times. This was not merely a metaphorical warning against promiscuity but a greater mechanical demand of femininity. Because my thighs have always been chubby, following this most basic feminine imperative has always proven difficult. And in this fundamental way, my fat body defies gendered notions of propriety and morality.

To most, femininity may be seen as a presumed space that masculinity has left behind, but my gender is exacted with intentionality. As a fat brown woman, femininity is something I decided I wanted, and something I must fight for daily.

For a long time I didn't think I was a girl. In primary school my friends and I enacted the romances we read about in young adult novels, and I always played the boy. I wasn't small, dainty or frail. So thorough was my resignation to the male role for these reasons that I didn't even ask if I could play the girl. There was a tacit but monstrously clear understanding: I was best suited to play the boy; my playing a girl simply wasn't believable. These little girls practiced growing up to become straight women at my expense. My indignity didn't have a name because I couldn't imagine any other possibility. Neither could they.

At church 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, the shape of our faces, the color palette that best suit our skin tone and the husbands we would have in the future. As problematic and sexist as I would later find this experience to be, at the time I enjoyed imagining my womanhood filled with the things my badges celebrated. My Missionettes meetings taught me that performing heterofemininity was worthy of celebration and would yield the ultimate reward of love from a man. After the meetings I would go home and watch cartoons and read books about the romantic love I wanted, but which seemed to exist exclusively for thin white girls. I associated love with thinness and thinness with femininity. I learned to cope with my feelings of failure by assuring myself that in the future I would be thin and a boy would love me and I would then be a real woman. I had no framework to imagine femininity outside of something that requires masculine authentication.

Even though I didn't have the language with which to describe it, I felt the nameless sense of not belonging with a sharp clarity that was painful and confusing. Though I could not have told you why, some part of me knew that if I could just be thin, become someone completely different, that I could have the things that girls wanted – that I was convinced I wanted.

As a result, dieting became a central part of my life. When I refer to dieting I mean the systematic process of intentional caloric restriction for the purpose of losing weight primarily for aesthetic or moral purposes. Dieting was many things to me: it was often difficult, but it also made me feel good and right and somehow, protected. I reveled in the days that I was so weak that I could barely stand. I loved watching my body grow smaller. I remember being excited by the idea that I couldn't defend myself against someone big and strong. I associated these feelings

with the highest forms of femininity. I had internalized all of those fairy tales with wispy waisted blondes and fainting maidens with alabaster skin. I wished for the “discipline” to truly commit to starvation. There were times I fantasized about taking a butcher knife and excising my fat, the parts I felt had betrayed and imprisoned me. I associated those feelings with being a real woman; they were the definition of femininity. The weakness and frailty that dieting brought on were intoxicating. I had never felt that way as a child. I played the boy who picked up my friends who held the lead when we danced and stood behind them embracing them, making them feel safe.

I realize now that my singular obsession with wasting away was no accident. I reacted to my position outside of traditional thin white heterofemininity by internalizing feelings of failure. Dieting was my way of communicating to myself and others that I wanted to be “good” and “right” and that I could be. Dieting was my way of conveying I understood that a woman’s role in America is to be small and obsessed with how much space and resources she takes consumes.¹ Dieting was my way of complying with racist notions of fitness that dictate a uniform and ideal body type adhering to narrow standards of health and beauty largely based on the Anglo Saxon body.² For a long time I was only as good as the number on my scale. But now I know a different life: a life where people don’t diet, a life where all bodies are good bodies, where laughter and tears fall out of open unapologetic mouths, where there’s always enough and in fact there is always more—where big girls are rowdy and wear pink glitter and bikinis.

My transition into this new and different life has some of its origins in small things, like my mother encouraging me to design clever comebacks to fat-shaming. More than anything, I attribute my earliest body radicalism to sexual and romantic attention from men, something I was told I would never experience because I was fat. My sexual experiences grounded me in my body and pushed me to question the cultural foundation that fat women are universally undesirable. My sexual attractiveness was political. The number of dates I was able to procure gave me a sense of brazenness, each one a personal affront to the fatphobia that resided as much inside me as outside my bedroom. My heterosexual engagement with men became an easy way to feel like an “actual woman.” Though fraught, I needed those intensely corporeal and vaginal encounters to heal from years of gender confusion and displacement.

I went on to learn about body image and eating disorders as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley. I was introduced to a decidedly white and upper middle class version of feminism that ideologically combined its second and third waves. Sex positivity was central to this feminism and many of the women who drew vagina portraits alongside me were queer in either orientation, politic or both. In this almost exclusively feminine space I was given the opportunity to cry as well as to begin considering systems like patriarchy while eating cupcakes decorated to look like vulvas. I was a willing convert to radicalism, but fat was to remain a final political frontier and I

¹ Gilman, Sander. *Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity* (Polity 2008) 7

² Farrell, Amy. *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (NYU Press 2011) 104

was given no vocabulary to articulate racism. I had been a mouthy fat girl who wore tight clothes and had lots of dates for a long time, but the hopes for weight loss remained long after my twentieth lover and my introduction to Inga Muscio. Dieting and self-loathing had become so natural, I couldn't imagine an alternative. Fatphobia was not just a feeling that lived inside me, it was a stifling aesthetic that seemed to be woven into every exchange, no matter how small or inconsequential. Despite my introduction and commitment to feminism, I still had no framework to imagine something beyond it.

The decision to stop dieting came slowly. There were thousands of moments leading to the point in my life at which I finally recognized a viable alternative. The pivotal moment came when I realized I had been missing an actual community of fat people – fat femmes in particular. Though the idea of “femme” is purposely elusive and impossible to typify, for me, a femme is a person who exacts and adopts a feminine identity and performance with political intentionality. It has nothing to do with assigned gender. It is a mode of engagement that has no code of conduct; it is a deeply populist queer praxis of anti-assimilation.

I fell in love with fat femmes the moment I met one. She represented a pivotal moment in my fat girl reinvention. She wore a vintage polka dot bathing suit and lounged near a pool in the center of hotel where a conference for fat queers was being held in Oakland in 2011. She wore huge sunglasses and a boy was following her around with a parasol so she wouldn't get a sunburn. It was her specific type of femininity – superlative, sexy, performative, awe-inspiring and arresting – that I wanted. She crystallized femme possibility. She represented queer femininity— something I had never seen. I met many more fat femmes after her. The femmes in the fat community have since become family. Through my friendships with them I learned to see that I had access to a type of femininity that had little to do with men, dieting or even my vagina and that had everything to do with resiliency, freedom and the revolutionary power of a cheetah print. If I had grown up thin or in a less fat-hating world, I may have been satisfied with Banana Republic cardigans and an occasional hint of cleavage for special occasions. If I had grown up white or in a less racist world, I may have been satisfied with modest pearls and monogamy. But since I grew up fat and brown, I wanted to be the fanciest, cheekiest chichona³ on the block. Everybody was gonna see my fur coat. Everybody was gonna smell my expensive perfume. Everybody was gonna want to know how I'd learned not to give a fuck.

After years of feeling like I didn't qualify for femininity, gender became more than being small or being weak. Gender became a politic and a choice. Mine is the kind of femininity that is hard won by tooth and nail, on your back and knees while you attempt to fuck and fight and primp your way back into existence. Mine is a femininity whose history resides in the arthritic knuckles of my grandmother who worked at a cannery and picked cotton, of fat women who have long been the butt of the joke and the shame of the family, of brown women who survive

³ Chicona is slang for a woman with large breasts

and laugh and suck the marrow out of bones, who don't know what all the English words mean but make the best tamales and know how to keep a secret.

My bright pink lipstick gold sandals, short skirts and glittery nail polish send an aggressive message: that all the rejection and psychological warfare, all the moments I wished this fat brown body had been dead and gone - none of it can stop me from looking fucking fine today.

Femininity is my vehicle for visibility. It signals that I am here, I am alive, and you can't stop me. My femininity is menacing: long nails, studded necklines, necklaces that read "bitch" and bracelets that bear spikes. Adorning my fat brown body with neon belts and crop tops indicates a politicized desire for visibility and a forceful claim to it. It is destabilizing because it is my way of settling a debt. Before I was taught that my body was wrong, I remember a time when my body was simply there to serve my greater psychic and physical desires. My plump belly signaled hunger. My chubby cheeks rounded to express joy. I remember loving the way that it felt when my body jiggled as I ran naked down the hallway of my childhood home. Fat was fun some of the times, but most of the time it was not even something I considered. It did not stop me from doing anything I truly wanted, and it wasn't until I was introduced to fatphobia that I no longer felt connected to that body, my body.

My native relationship to my body is gone. In its stead, I have built a new one. I am not afraid to tell you that the relationship I have with my body is grounded in an authenticity and realness that engages my past and the realities of the pain that shaped me. At around the age of five I learned to divorce myself from my body because I thought it was ugly, bad, and wrong. And as I grew up and learned the harsh lessons of gender conformity, I knew that my fat body prevented me from falling in line. This body has created a new opportunity for a different kind of gender expression. The femininity I now create and own is armor.

Femininity was not accidentally given to me, nor was it presumed. I fight for every shade of lipstick, every sway of my hips, every coy smile. Femininity is complex. To me it is a dream, it is drag, it is home. It is visibility and reclamation. A lie, a truth, a place where I store all my vulnerable wishes. The foundations of my femininity pivot on a fierceness that acknowledges the fight and the prize. I got my stripes through years of surviving fatphobia, racism and sexism; from every man I kissed and every inch of cleavage I showed to prove something to myself.

Some people think I'm rude because I'm vociferous about how much I love tiramisu and how insipid I find the coded language of white supremacy and sexism embedded neatly in the rhetoric of the War on Obesity. My femininity is about visibility because mine is the kind of marginality that seeks a witness. My appetite for visibility is inextricable from my experiences as a fat brown woman in a fatphobic, racist, male-privileging world.

And this is where the story of my femininity resides. I love being perceived as impolite, uppity, and hostile to traditional modes of docile existence. I am your worst nightmare and your wildest dream. I walk the line between desire and disdain, pushing buttons, eating tacos, and

spitting on the shiny loafer of The Man. My fat body unveils a life at the margins, where the culture's strongholds are at the greatest risk. My raucous belly laughter is the sound of breaking all the promises I made – tacit and otherwise - to be good and small and weak and obedient. I represent the end of propriety. My pink pencil skirt is a call to arms.