

A CHICANA BUTCH MANIFESTO: REFLECTIONS OF MY ORNERY SPIRIT

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ABSTRACT

A personal reflection on my identity as a Chicana butch lesbian from the El Paso-Juárez border with guest appearances by Jean Cordova, Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Radclyffe Hall, Monique Wittig, Jack Halberstam, Sor Juana, Barbie, and Juan Gabriel.

KEYWORDS: butch lesbian, second wave feminism, compulsory heterosexuality, social construction of gender, the erotic, pronouns, identity politics, nonbinary, tortillerismo.

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“To survive being butch you have to have been born with an ornery spirit.” —Jeanne Cordova (*Butches, Lies and Feminism* 273).

1. THE BUTCH MENACE

Butches have always been unruly, disobedient, and unapologetic. For the hegemonic straight world, butches embody the proverbial bulldyke or lesbian man-hater who paradoxically looks, dresses, and wants to be like a man. For the second wave of white lesbian feminists, the butch/femme lifestyle was a throwback to patriarchal gender binary codes that only reinscribed heteronormativity and monogamy (then considered a straight value) on the lesbian body. As Cordova explains in her memoir, *When We Were Outlaws*, “[f]eminism taught that sexual exclusivity was a male invention...Coupling exclusively was imitating heterosexuality, colonizing a sister, and otherwise just plain wrong” (197). Anything male-identified was “a feminist cardinal sin” (*Outlaws* 123).

Living out loud in the white feminist lesbian scene of 1970s Los Angeles, Cordova says, “[f]eminism tore apart my butch identity” because it made her question every choice she made, whether for a partner or a wardrobe or a political cause to champion (Cordova 283). At the time, butches were almost as anathema to the mainstream women’s movement as patriarchy itself; seen as male wannabes, butches were not welcome at women’s retreats or happenings. Butches were the most extreme form of what Betty Friedan called the “lavender menace” of mainstream feminism¹.

In her *New York Times* article, “The Renegades,” Kerry Manders explains the look, the attitude, the variety, and the history of butch identity. “From their earliest incarnations, butches faced brutal discrimination and oppression, not only from outside their community but also from within” writes Manders, explaining that for white middle class feminists (even lesbian feminists) of the 1970s and 1980s who “marginalized certain forms of ‘otherness’—working class lesbians, lesbians of color and masculine of center women,” butchness was seen as “inextricably misogynist and butch-femme relationships as dangerous replications of heteronormative gender roles” (Manders n.p.) Nonetheless, butchness has survived and miraculously multiplied in its representations, anchored by the one imperative that makes butch identity the opposite of normative masculinity: to serve our woman in bed. Indeed, “the butch’s pleasure was always connected to the act of giving; her ability to pleasure her fem was the key to her own satisfaction” (Nestle 73)— perhaps the most obvious reversal of the heterosexual binary where it is the male’s pleasure that always comes first (yes, pun intended).

Long before Marvin Gaye crooned about needing a woman to give him some “Sexual Healing,” or the Rolling Stones complained about not getting any “Satisfaction,” butches were performing both on their femmes—carving notches on the old bedpost. Some use their hands or their tongues; yet others strap on dildos to satisfy their femme’s yearning for connection, penetration, and pleasure. Still other butches crave their own penetration. There are so many kinds of butches: butch tops, butch bottoms, stone butches, glam butches, handy butches, dapper butches, hard butches, soft butches, trans butches, studs. What we all have in common is our continued identification in a female body and our desire for another female or female-identified body, a desire which for some butches led to being harassed, beaten, or killed, while for others it fueled our individual or collective struggles to exist and resist. Despite our t-shirts, leather jackets, and sensible shoes, despite our confident masculine swagger and playing the active role in bed, despite our legibility as non-heterosexual bodies, butches do not want to be men. We might be perceived as male impersonators and traitors to our gender, but butches still think of ourselves as women, and identify with our lesbian/female-centered sexuality.

2. COMPULSORY REBELLION

In 1980, Adrienne Rich wrote about the soul-killing that “compulsory heterosexuality” wreaks on women and queers. As a converted lesbian feminist, she could see into both camps, and understood that her own liberation as a woman, a feminist, and a poet lay in the struggle for lesbian rights. Indeed, she theorized a spectrum of woman-loving-woman relationships that she called

the lesbian continuum to include a range —through each woman’s life and throughout history— of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman ... [but] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support...” (Rich 648-649).

For Rich, best female friends, sisters, and even mothers and daughters have a place on the lesbian continuum, simply because of the intimacies they share, and the way that they care for each other as female bodies. For all of the ways that the lesbian continuum is a concerted “nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance” (Rich 649), it is also prone to all the imperfections of human experience, including violence, substance abuse, internalized hatred, and suicide. Rich does not believe in romanticizing lesbianism but notes that the reason for those negatives is the lack of records “documenting the realities of lesbian existence,” which keeps “heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community” (Rich 649).

What has been kept from us causes pain. My parents divorced when I was five and I grew up with my father’s side of the family, not allowed to see my mother except for three times a year. This created in me an ineffable desire for the absent mother. Even though I had a grandmother who energetically took on the maternal role for me, I craved that intimate connection with my mother, and often transferred that craving to the mothers of some of my friends, and even to some of my own aunts. Much later, this longing ingrained itself in my sexual desire for physically distant and emotionally absent women.

In my first-generation Mexican immigrant family, to rebel against the gender identity those with female genitalia are supposed to embody meant to rebel against our culture, against authority at all levels, against God, and even worse, against Grandma. This rebellious streak forced those of us who, as Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands*, were “pushed out of the tribe for being different” (60) to reject those impositions we were supposed to have inherited from our mothers and grandmothers, and to acquire a new identity marked not only by how we wanted to present ourselves aesthetically, but more radically, by the desire our female bodies felt for other female bodies. For my Chicana lesbian generation, then, our lesbianism was not just our sexual orientation; it was our gender, our cause, our revolution, and we defined lesbians as women-loving-women, whether we presented ourselves as butches or femmes or androgynous. The “loving” part spanned the spectrum from serial monogamy to butch-femme, to S&M, but always implied an erotic physical connection with another woman.

I came out in late 1970s El Paso, Texas, in a working-class fronteriza community of Chicana and Mexicana butches and femmes. The butches wore button-down shirts, boots, and cowboy hats (it was Texas, after all), and “our women” wore heels, lipstick, and tight clothes that accentuated their hot-Mama curves. There were several gay bars in El Paso, but only one woman’s bar, El Noa Noa on Alameda Street. Named after the Juan Gabriel song and owned by la Molly (butch) and her femme “wife,” Olga, El Noa Noa opened its doors to all women². It didn’t matter if you were gay or straight, single or coupled, and drag queens were always welcome, but straight men were strictly excluded. It wasn’t exactly a feminist space. You couldn’t just dance with any femme you wanted. You had to make sure she wasn’t partnered, first, and if she was, you had to ask “her butch” for permission to take “her mujer” out on the dancefloor. Permission was usually granted, if you asked politely, but the butch partner watched you closely from the sidelines, legs wide apart, arms crossed under flattened tits, making sure you didn’t cross any lines with her femme.

Once, I tried walking into El Noa Noa still wearing my waitressing uniform—a flouncy blouse over some black pants, and I hadn’t washed off my mascara and blue eyeliner—and Chayo, the bar’s bouncer, didn’t let me in at first.

“Come on, Chayo, you know me, I come every week.”

“Chale, esa. I don’t know you. What’s that shit on your face?” She asked, scowling, holding my chin with her big hand and turning my head side to side to examine me more closely in the dim glow of the streetlight.

At 21, I thought of myself as bisexual, still married to the white man who had been my high school sweetheart and sneaking off to this woman’s bar whenever I had a chance. I was not yet schooled, you might say, in the ways of dykes or baby butches. And Chayo, your classic brick wall of a bull-dagger in men’s clothes, instilled massive respect from all the patrons. I had seen her singlehandedly pick a man up between her burly arms and half-carry, half-push him out of our women-only sanctuary.

“Go wash that shit off, cabrona!” she said, slapping me gently and winking, but I knew she wasn’t kidding, just as I knew I better use the Men’s Bathroom, not the Women’s. El Noa Noa was “un lugar de ambiente, donde todo es diferente,” as Juan Gabriel’s famous tune goes³, but nonetheless, it had its own rules. Butches and femmes did not use the same bathroom. On the dancefloor, butches led, and femmes followed. Although both smoked and drank to their hearts’ content, it was butches who lit the cigarettes, and butches who paid.

I had learned my lesson: I was seen as a butch in that bar, and butches did not wear makeup at El Noa Noa. Wearing make-up made you a “jota,” and that meant you could be topped by another butch. No self-respecting femme wanted to be with a jota. For a butch patron of El Noa Noa, turning into a jota was as humiliating as a stone butch being flipped; “letting another woman be sexually aggressive with you if you were a stone butch was called being flipped, and it was shameful in many working-class lesbian communities because it meant that a butch had permitted another woman to take power away from her sexually...” (Faderman 169-170). I never wore make-up again at El Noa-Noa (except the two times I performed, first as Blondie, then as Neil Diamond, because I needed the prize money to make the rent), and I developed a Midas touch when it came to pleasuring femmes, “but when it was my turn, I wanted the same treatment...everything wanted to be touched, turned to gold” (Gaspar de Alba, Longfellow Bridge 89).

It is likely that some of my dyke mentors in that bar were jotas or maybe stone butches who refused to be touched by their femme

lovers, while others (like me) were still married to men and living a double life as heterosexual lesbians. All of them, however, identified as either butch or femme. There was no fluidity allowed in that place and time. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, Lillian Faderman writes about the history of lesbians in the 20th-century and explains that the butch-femme scene was pervasive in the 1940s and 1950s, especially among working class and young lesbians, and lesbians of color. Although she was writing about mainly white lesbian culture in urban metropolises like New York City and Los Angeles, Faderman's study resonates with my own experience in the 1970s border city of El Paso.

My generation of butch understood, as Cordova argues, that “[b]eing butch, femme, straight, bi, transsexual is our gender identity, our gender destiny. It is not our job to redefine who we are; it is merely our job to discover who we are—and make a safe-land for our reality” (Cordova 291). That safe-land for me was populated by other butches and femmes, many of them from Juárez, others from the Segundo Barrio, the Lower Valley, or Fort Bliss. I transitioned very quickly from bisexual to full-on butch lesbian, much to my husband's surprise. A year after our wedding, a year of too much drama, alcohol, and sexual experimentation, I stopped shaving my legs and armpits, cut my hair, and ended my heterosexual fantasy life, to start a new relationship with a Mexicana femme 11 years my senior (but that's a whole other story).

Butch was my identity. Butch explained what I looked like, what kind of clothes I liked to wear, what kind of woman I was, what kind of woman I wanted, what I liked in bed, and what sort of feminism I practiced. Now I just had to finalize my divorce, come out to my Mom a second time (since, apparently, she seemed to have forgotten about the first), and take a Women's Studies class at UTEP.

3. THE ENEMY CAMP

In that first and only Women's Studies class I took in college at the University of Texas at El Paso, taught by an out lesbian professor⁴, I heard the concept “social construction of gender” for the first time. To explain it we read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and learned that “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (De Beauvoir 301). In other words, while we are born with sexual genitalia that determines the gender we are assigned at birth, the performance

of that gender is based on fulfilling or rejecting the obligatory gender expectations of a heteronormative, patriarchal world in which all of us are socialized, reinforced by every single institution that shapes our lives and constructs our identities: family, church, school, mass media, and popular culture. Sex is the genital segregation of the body, but gender is a binary straitjacket imposed on the mind and the spirit, and the first place that inculcates this duality is the home. As John Rechy stated in an interview, LGBTQ folks are “the only minority born into the opposing camp; call it ‘the enemy camp’” (qtd in Debra Castillo 113).

As a kid, I was a weirdo, a girl who liked boy-things —shooting marbles, racing Hot Wheels, climbing trees— and deplored girl-things: dolls, pretend tea parties, hair curlers and nail polish. I was always the Dad when my cousins and I played “a la familia”. I didn’t know, at first, that I was refusing the social construction of my gender at that young age, or that I was being rebellious when I insisted on wearing shorts under my Catholic school uniform in grade school or refused to sit with my ankles crossed like a lady or pretended to lose the cute white gloves my grandmother bought for me every Easter. That’s just who I was. I didn’t play with the Barbies my mom gave me each birthday, just stuffed a cotton wad under their clothes and laid them in my drawer side by side to wait out their eternal pregnancy.

“Where are all your Barbies, Alicia. Don't you know how hard it was your mom to get the money together to buy those dolls?”

“The're sick. They can't come out to play right now”.

At least that’s what I saw when any of my aunts were pregnant or on their *cochinada*, as my grandmother called the monthly bleeding that seemed to afflict all the women in the family. Being pregnant or bleeding down there meant they were sick, so they had to stay inside the house and not do anything strenuous. This meant our older friends and girl cousins couldn’t go swimming or play tag or kick-the-can in the street, and our mothers and tías couldn’t go out dancing with their husbands. Interestingly, it didn’t keep them from having to cook, do the laundry, scrub the floors, and take care of the kids. Worse than being trapped inside the house, though, the *cochinada* could also entrap you into motherhood, for a menstruating girl could get a baby down there if she wasn’t careful, if she didn’t keep her legs closed, her eyes down, and her face clean of makeup. At

night, I remember praying to la Virgen to protect me from the two most horrible things that could happen to girls: blood and babies.

I did, however, love food and gardening and animals, especially cats. Although I hated having to help my grandmother with the *pinche* work of peeling vegetables and dicing garlic and onion every day after school, at Girl Scouts, the only badge I earned was a cooking badge on the one and only camping trip I was allowed to take. I'm pretty sure I didn't volunteer for cooking duty; the troop leaders must have put me there on purpose. I worked beside my grandmother in the kitchen every day, so I knew my way around a stove, knew it was important to sauté the onions first before putting in the meat and vegetables and tomato sauce.

Although I had grown up in the tradition of weekly carne asadas, I had never cooked over an open fire or put a whole meal together by myself. Undaunted, I concocted a huge pot of stew with several packages of ground beef, a bunch of sliced onions, a sack of peeled potatoes, Ketchup, and a few giant cans of Campbell's vegetable soup. While the rest of my troop was out earning their tracking and knot-tying badges, I used a wooden spoon half my size and stirred this *menjurje*⁵ of a campfire stew for hours and served everyone a hot meal when they came back.

After the clean-up, the troop leaders gathered us around the campfire and sang songs and told stories that scared some of the girls, but not me, as I'd been a fan of *Dark Shadows* since fourth grade. The rest of the night, we were allowed to stay out as late as we wanted but forbidden to leave the campsite. The grown-ups tucked into their cabins and some of the older girls snuck off to smoke cigarettes or whatever. But I stayed close to the music. The camp lights turned off. Someone raised the volume on their portable radio, and we danced around the campfire under the stars until we dropped into our sleeping bags—me and a bunch of girls. Octavio Paz argues that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz could not have known what gender she desired when at 19 she decided to leave the world and join the convent. But at 12 years old, dancing with all those girls in the woods into the early hours of the morning, I knew.

I loved Girl Scouts!

Had Girl Scouts existed when Radclyffe Hall was growing up, she might have imagined a different ending to *The Well of Loneliness*. But I

fell in love with her butch protagonist, Stephen Gordon, nonetheless. Not romantically, of course. I wasn't attracted to Stephen, I wanted to be Stephen. I had never read a book with a butch protagonist (Nancy Drew didn't count). She had a man's name, a tall masculine body with narrow hips and big hands, an athletic body with a writer's mind, and she had known since the age of seven that she could only love women. I, too, had always felt "strange" and un-girly, had harbored secret passionate feelings for other girls since I was six years old. I always wore my long hair in a ponytail or a braid, preferred bike-riding over baking, and had strong friendships with some of the boys in the neighborhood. And like Stephen, I was always in love with one girl or another, even though I didn't want to be one.

In high school I was a self-proclaimed women's libber and a jock, on the varsity of both the girls' volleyball and basketball teams (which I helped to start with my editorials about gender inequities in the school's athletics policies), but I was also a nerd on the staff of our school newspaper and our creative writing journal. I was sixteen when I kissed a woman for the first time and felt the butterfly stirrings of my lesbian identity, but I also had an Anglo boyfriend who was both a poet and a football player, who could eat jalapeños as though they were pickles, who took my virginity in the back seat of his car and later became my husband. When I made love to a woman for the first time, three months after my wedding ceremony, the fog lifted, and suddenly, as Johnny Nash put it in his famous song⁶, I could clearly see all the heterosexual obstacles clouding up my life and knew exactly what I needed to do to find my rainbow.

When I signed up for that Women's Studies class as a Junior in college, I was already walking the tightrope between my false consciousness as a heterosexual wife and the terrifying truth of my lesbian desire. It took me over a year and a half to tell my husband, but in that time, I joined a weekly lesbian gathering, snuck off to gay bars on Friday nights after my waitressing shift, and fell in love with every woman I bedded. I enjoyed threesomes with women and came home drunk to crawl into my young husband's bed and succumb to his needs. My bifurcated existence was exhausting. I wrote convoluted poems about the new self I was becoming, and wept long sentences of guilt and fear into a secret journal that I hid under the spare in the trunk of my car. To give me strength for the inevitable transition I

was facing from straight wife to butch dyke, I read *Desert of the Heart* by Jane Rule and Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* more than once, but it was Hall's *Well of Loneliness* that most imprinted on my butch self. I scoffed at all the trappings of femininity for myself but desired someone who flaunted those very talents I derided.

4. WE ARE WHAT WE DESIRE

For Audre Lorde desire is rooted in what she called "the power of the erotic." In her classic essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde argues that the erotic is a deep and, for many women, no matter what their sexual preference, untapped reservoir of power.

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed and *unrecognized* feeling (emphasis added). ...As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational *knowledge* ...the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation ... The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and *recognizing* its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. ...the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. ... Of course, women so empowered are dangerous (Lorde 53, 55) (emphasis added).

I wasn't averse to sex with men, but I never felt that deep reservoir of nirvana that I experienced when I made love to a woman. Maybe that's what I most love about being butch, this irrational joy at being rooted in the power of my desire to satisfy my *mujer's* body.

Lorde has been critiqued in the current century for assuming that this "power of the erotic" can only be tapped through sex, and it is something to think about, this assumption that sexual liberation is the ultimate form of liberation from oppression for women in a misogynistic world. But what if the millennial generation, those who grow up in a historical period that does not punish or ridicule them when they express their sexual fluidity, but rather provides them with the language, no, the discourse that helps them to better understand

and inhabit that fluidity, what if this generation does not actually feel sexually repressed? What if, unlike my generation and that of the lesbians and gay men before me, whose lives and literature helped me to find and name myself, the new generation of genderqueers, transmen and transwomen, non-binary, pangender, agender, and even cisgendered folks don't identify through their sexual desire or practice? What if they radically redefine our understanding of the difference between sex and gender, so that sex, or rather the body, becomes as irrelevant as the gender they were assigned at birth, and what matters is identity, itself, or rather, the performance of an identity that could be sexual, sartorial, or psychological? What if the "depth of feeling" that Lorde terms the "power of the erotic" lives in their desire to fuck with gender not just fuck the gender they choose?

If, as Lorde argues, patriarchy dispossesses women of color of their bodily birthright, or power of the erotic, how does it colonize the LGBTQ+-identified body? If to love one of your own kind is the "crime" for which queers of all kinds and colors have been persecuted, arrested, and beaten to death since the onslaught of patriarchy, how do we decolonize our desire and reclaim our power? I'm not talking about identity here. I'm talking about the body, and the body's very palpable longing—the want that triggers a perhaps even more essential essentialism, the need to create, to transform, to give birth to our wildest, deepest, most sensual self, the self which is rooted in the purest pleasures of the body, the kind of feeling that is mutually physical and emotional, sexual, and spiritual. That makes your mouth water and "turns your tongue hard and moist at the thought of tasting chocolate one more time" (Gaspar de Alba, Beggar 48). That makes you wet when you touch the lips or genitals of another body that looks like yours and yet is not your own, a body that wants the same thing you want. "*Quiero gritar, she says./Give me your tongue,/make me scream*" (Gaspar de Alba, Beggar 48).

"The name 'lesbian' is the term we affix to the pleasurable and cumbersome intersections of embodiments, practices, and roles that historical processes have winnowed down to the precise specifications of an identity" wrote Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* (50). To me, lesbian is the term I affix to my hunger for another woman's body, a specifically-feminine-gendered female body on which to imprint my butch-gendered female-bodied desire.

“Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man),” says Monique Wittig, “because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man...” (Wittig, “Not Born a Woman,” 108). In other words, lesbians are not women. Three hundred years earlier, in her poem, “In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru, Who Sent Her Clay Vessels While Suggesting She Would Better Be a Man,” the Mexican nun/scholar/poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who is known the world over as “the Tenth Muse”⁷ and “first feminist” of Latin America, used the Latin etymology of the word “mujer” and a feminist logic that preceded Wittig’s by 300 years to express her own disidentification with her normative gender.

...here [in the convent] we have no Salmacis,
 whose crystal water, so they tell,
 to nurture masculinity
 possesses powers unexcelled.
 I have no knowledge of these things,
 except that I came to this place
 so that, if true that I am female,
 none substantiate that state.
 I know, too, that they were wont
 to call wife, or woman, in the Latin
uxor, only those who wed,
 though wife or woman might be virgin.
 So in my case, it is not seemly
 that I be viewed as feminine,
 as I will never be a woman
 who may as woman serve a man.
 I know only that my body,
 not to either state inclined,
 is neuter, abstract, guardian
 of only what my Soul consigns
 (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz 141).

Sor Juana joined the convent not because there was a magic fountain there that could change her sex, but to safeguard her secret self, that part of her that did not desire a male consort and was not interested in living a heteronormative life as anybody’s wife or mother, which

was her only other choice as a woman of her class and caste. The convent was the only place where she could spiritually neuter her body and safely forsake the expectations of her assigned gender so that she could live a life of the mind, a privilege reserved for men. Sor Juana was fully cognizant that her body was not inclined toward femininity or masculinity, despite that she was accused by her Mother Superior and Father Confessor of indulging in masculine tendencies (reading and writing) and having masculine penmanship. It's in her love poems to other women that we learn why she called herself "la peor del mundo" when she renewed her vows in the convent's Book of Professions the year before she died. By calling herself "la peor" or the worst woman, but also the worst nun, in the world, she was stating the truth about her identity. Not only did she refuse to serve a man sexually, and thus inverted the social construction of her gender, but also, she rejected the vows of humility, chastity, poverty, and obedience that the Catholic church imposed on cloistered nuns by devoting her life to letters and enjoying widespread celebrity from within the convent.

In my historical novel, *Sor Juana's Second Dream* (1999), I construct Sor Juana as a lesbian nun whose only discursive tools to claim her troubled gender identity and female-centered desire were pun and etymology, but who nonetheless rebelled against every heteronormative dictate of her mind, body, and vocation. In her poem "Primero sueño," she referred to herself as "la segunda vez rebelde," the second-time rebel. Her first rebellion: joining the convent to avoid marriage or intercourse with a man, and to have a place —not a room but a cell of her own— in which to indulge her passion for writing and studying. Her second rebellion: hiding her lesbian self under a Hieronymite nun's habit. Reflecting on her lovemaking with her Divina Lysis (as she called La Condesa), Sor Juana writes in her secret journal:

I remember how my mind seemed to separate from me, like a yolk from the egg white, and how in my imagination I watched my hands and mouth demonstrate the knowledge of my desire, as if I have always known what to do to another woman's body. Is it the harmony of our sex, the fact that we are both women, that gives me this knowledge? Or is it an epistemology long buried in my bones, a knowledge I was born with? (Gaspar de Alba, *Second Dream* 313).

Was it the recognition of their female bodies that led her to know how to satisfy la Condesa, or was it the knowledge of her own sexual longing, an epistemology of the self that Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento*, that guided Juana to climb on top of her beloved's body, and "rock them both to a sudden crescendo that felt like ecstasy but sounded like the deepest pain" (ibid 308)?

Was Sor Juana a butch?

In *Post-Borderlandia: Chicana Literature and Gender Variant Critique*, Jackie Cuevas clarifies that butch requires the presence of a readable "female body" onto which traditionally masculine codes can be reconstituted as a lesbian gender expression. The butch's subversive appropriation of masculinity for expression and use in what Butler refers to as "lesbian contexts" troubles the gender binary not just by mixing genders but also by intersecting gender expression with transgressive sexual orientation (34).

Butch is always already a "transgressive sexual orientation." In current gender parlance, we could say that a butch lesbian is, in fact, nonbinary and genderqueer. Cuevas elaborates further:

Representations of Chicana butchness explore a range of aspects of queer, masculine, working- class, Chicana, female experience. In doing so, Chicana butch texts shift dominant discourses about butchness. One dominant misconception is the trite idea that butch is a retrograde or misogynist form of gender identity or expression. The second is the idea that butch fell out of favor and then re-emerged onto the lesbian public scene (*ibid*).

If we are not women, in the socially constructed meaning of the term, if we are not feminists because of our supposedly retrograde ideas about masculinity and femininity, if we are not lesbians because we exceed the category of women, then what is a butch? A great pretender, a man in drag, an in-between, a third gender, a he/she, or a they?

5. THE PRONOUN IMPASSE

When random people call me "Sir," they are reading me, my short hair, my masculine clothing, perhaps the way I sit or move my body, as a male person. They quickly "correct" themselves when they look at me further and see that I am, instead, a body with breasts. "Excuse

me, I mean, Ma'am." I would rather be called "Sir" than "Ma'am" any day, not because I want to be male, or transmasculine, but because I don't identify with any of the attributes of femininity that are embedded in the word "Ma'am," a contraction for "Madam." Furthermore, I absolutely refuse to call myself a "wife," even though I have been legally and happily married to the same amazing woman for 15 years⁸. The word *wife* is even more embedded with female-gendered attitudes and behaviors that I do not claim as part of my own queer lesbian identity. The English language is very limited when it comes to gender-variant terminology, which is why, as a Chicana with a bilingual birthright, I prefer to designate my married status by calling myself *marida* rather than wife. In Spanish, *marido* means husband, deriving from the Latin *maritus*, which means married man, which itself comes from the root, *maritalis*, from which we also get marital, or relating to marriage. *Marida* is a neologism, my butch reconstruction of the Spanish term for husband that ends with an "a" to signify that I am not male, I am not a wife, but I am a married person⁹.

In an online interview with Sinclair Sexsmith for *Lambda Literary* in 2012, Jack Halberstam said, in response to the question of pronouns, "people are calling me he nowadays. I'm going with that. It's been such an issue, this name business." But his chosen identity, we learn towards the end of the interview is "transgender butch," which he defines as "completely cross-gender identified," in other words, that while masculinity defines him, he is "not trying to live in the world as a man. That's the difference between [Jack] and a transgender man." Halberstam's use of the "he" pronoun is not rooted in the alteration of his body, but in the interpretation of his gender presentation.

It's not totally important to my understanding of self that other people read me as a man. It's important that they read me as masculine, and it's important that they read me in some way that I'm at odds with female embodiment. But it's also important that they read me as someone who is not going to have that tension resolved by getting some surgeries. We're living in a moment where people are pretty creative about their relationship to gender variance, and I think that the queer worlds we live in can tolerate a lot of different gender designations, so I don't see why we can't hold onto "butch" along with

a whole set of other markers and identity, difference, embodiment, masculinity, variance and so on (Sexsmith np).

I don't always agree with Jack, but what he says about holding on to the butch designation in our vast vocabulary of gender identities, makes me want to shake his hand. Of course, 2012 was a long time ago, especially in queer time. Things may have changed for him since then, but as one of the main chroniclers and interpreters of this gender variant movement, Halberstam's words resonate loudly with different generations of queer folk. I prefer Judith Butler's take on butch identity in *Undoing Gender* because Butler roots it in the concept of desire. Although acknowledging that butch desire can be "experienced, that is, named and interpreted, as a kind of masculinity," it is a masculinity "that is not to be found in men" (Butler 197). In other words, for Butler the whole discourse of sexual difference needs to be expanded beyond the binary, beyond the phallogocentric—a view that reads butch desire as either a masculine sexuality or a manifestation of internalized misogyny—and in that expansion, "butch desire ought properly to be described as another permutation of feminine desire" (*ibid*). Exactly. A non-heteronormative, non-binary, but nonetheless queer and female-embodied desire.

It doesn't bother me to be perceived as male, even though my pronouns, until recently, were limited to she/her/hers. In fact, I rather enjoy the confusion. "No problem," I say, or "no need to apologize." What I'm trying to understand in this age of inclusivity, is why there is so much gender exclusivity in the Gen Z generation? The new gender spectrum may, indeed, be troubling the binary gender order, but are the transfolk, the genderqueers, the gender-deviant, gender-non-conforming bodies who rigidly adhere to pronoun correctness reifying the very binary they are trying to dismantle, the notion of sexual difference entrenched in those traditional gender norms through which they were socialized as bodies, even as their own bodies alter our understandings of femininity and masculinity? Why is it that to "misgender" someone these days, or refer to them by a prior pronoun, is tantamount to a hate crime, even though the faux pas is not intended to perpetrate harm on the individual? Emma Pérez might say it is the "will to feel" attacked, erased, colonized that motivates this reaction. Is this a "hermeneutic power struggle" (Pérez 124) between someone

in power and someone in the margins? How do we break down those power dynamics so that, instead of enacting the tired script of the colonial encounter, we step out of that framework altogether? Is that even possible for queers/transfolk/lesbians of color whose lives are already stained with the “stubborn impression” (Pérez 133) of colonialism and its conquering regimes and phobias?.

Call me an idealist, but might we not benefit by joining our hands and hearts as we chart a path to that revolutionary “*left-handed world* [of] the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged” (emphasis in the original) that Anzaldúa called *El Mundo Zurdo*? Anzaldúa envisioned a movement of international unity for all the disenfranchised, disempowered people of the world, and understood that only by standing together in our differences would we be able to change the world. “For separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution” (*Mundo Zurdo* 196).

When straight people “misgender” me as masculine, when little girls ask me in the women’s bathroom whether I am a girl or a boy, I don’t feel harmed or disrespected because my identity is not tied to my pronoun, and I know that not everyone around me knows what a butch is or shares my critique of heteronormative sexual politics. Considering that I have very short hair and only wear men’s clothes and shoes, my gender presentation itself is what might be described as masculine of center, so if that places me in the genderqueer category, I won’t argue. I might be fine expanding my pronouns to he/him and they/them, and I might be misread as a transitioning body, but I am not taking hormones or otherwise crossing into the realm of a transman. Butch is already crossing the boundary between genders. To me, butch is my gender, lesbian my sexual preference, *la frontera* my place of origin, and Chicana, my ethnic and political identity. I am a Chicana butch lesbian *fronteriza* of the late baby boomer generation, and I inhabit the *nepantla* space between genders and pronouns. That is my “*sitio y lengua*” in a nutshell, as Emma Pérez called the different sites and discourses by which we articulate our identities (see “Sexuality and Discourse”).

6. TORTILLERAS, WE ARE CALLED

Because I came to political consciousness under the influence of radical feminist thinkers, decolonial mestizas, strategic essentialists, women of color word warriors, and left-world activists who articulate the absolute joy and terrible fear of living in and loving the female-gendered body, of making visible the innermost truths of that body, of prioritizing our needs and fighting for our right to pursue whatever form of happiness and self-fulfillment we want, our human desire to love and, yes, fuck, whomever we choose, I would like to reclaim the power of my own radical erotic, which is encoded for me in the word “tortillera.” I must confess that, back in the 1980s, I knew nothing of the word “tortillera” as a signifier for lesbian identity. Despite my Mexican upbringing on the Texas-Mexico border, despite my love of tortillas, I learned the colloquialism, “tortillera,” when I moved to the Midwest, where I had gotten a scholarship to begin my PhD in American Studies at the University of Iowa. There were lots of dykes in Iowa City, most of them white and wearing the same aesthetic, what I call Birkenstock Butch: jeans, flannel shirts, and clunky sandals that gave way to shit-stomper boots in the snow. I slept with a couple of them, for diversity’s sake, but it felt more like research than pleasure. Femmes, or Lipstick Lesbians, were not cool in that crowd.

When a Cuban-identified Irish American femme from my Feminist Theory class invited me to a party of “maricones and tortilleras,” I experienced that weird sense of disorientation that comes when something out of your cultural past —the making of tortillas— makes a sudden appearance in a present that is completely out of context —like a Mexican flag in a 4H Club in West Liberty, Iowa, or a tortillera as a metaphor for lesbian.

What’s the connection, I asked?

¿*Qué se yo, chica?* she said in a perfect Cuban accent. Something about the sound of two women making love, maybe. The sound of two palms coming together. The sound of clapping.

In part because I wanted to deconstruct these affinities —the feel of warm hands burrowing deep into wet dough, the sounds of sucking, kneading, rolling, clapping the cornmeal into a finished shape—, in part because through writing the poem, I recognized the alchemical process in the two actions involving hands and heat and scent and the creative drive to roll out a perfect outcome —from wet

cornmeal/desire to hot tortilla/orgasm— and in part because I was possessed by a mad butch hard need to make tortillas with a Latina femme I met at that party, I wrote the following poem:

Making Tortillas

My body remembers
what it means to love slowly,
what it means to start
from scratch:
to soak the maíz,
scatter bonedust in the limewater,
and let the seeds soften
overnight.

Sunrise is the best time
for grinding masa,
cornmeal rolling out
on the metate like a flannel sheet.
Smell of wet corn, lard, fresh
morning love and the light
sound of clapping.

Pressed between the palms,
clap-clap
thin yellow moons—
clap-clap
still moist, heavy still
from last night's soaking
clap-clap
slowly start finding their shape
clap-clap.

My body remembers
the feel of the griddle,
beads of grease sizzling
under the skin, a cry gathering
like an air bubble in the belly
of the unleavened cake. Smell
of baked tortillas all over the house,
all over the hands still
hot from clapping, cooking.

Tortilleras, we are called,
grinders of maíz, makers, bakers,
slow lovers of women.
The secret is starting from scratch.
(Gaspar de Alba, *Beggar* 44-45).

Because it positions me in the kitchen, as it were, engaged in the sexual alchemy of transforming a friend into a lover, and because it names me in the genealogy of tortilleras, the poem both does and does not disidentify my lesbian identity from that female construction of gender that locates our value as nurturers in the domestic space. But the poem also changes that domestic space, not kitchen, but bedroom with flannel sheets, not a quick taco, but a long, slow, erotic climax from the soft seed to the moist hands to the hot griddle to the sizzling cry gushing from the belly of the woman I serve at dinner.

I, too, write “for the hard ones,” as tatiana de la tierra called women who love and love to fuck other women, “lesbian texts are passed from hand to hand and mouth to mouth between lesbians. they are located on the skin, in the look, in the geography of the palms of the hands” (de la tierra 49). What do I call this hard radical desire? I don’t do TERF; I would much rather TICL your fancy, because that, too, is part of “the ornery spirit” of my Chicana butch identity¹⁰.

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NOTES

I would like to thank Emma Pérez, for all her advice on this essay over the years. Thanks for having my back, Bud!

- 1 Betty Friedan, President of NOW (National Organization for Women) called lesbians a "lavender menace" to the burgeoning women's movement in 1969, saying that lesbians gave feminists a bad name. Lesbians were banned from the Second Congress To Unite Women that took place in New York City in 1970; however, sporting lavender or purple T-shirts handscreened with LAVENDER MENACE, lesbians infiltrated the Congress, hijacked the meeting, and insisted that lesbian issues were women's issues and could not be brushed aside by heterosexual feminists. See "Lavender Menace Action at Second Congress to Unite Women." <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/lavender-menace-action-at-second-congress-to-unite-women/>

- 2 Names have been changed to protect privacy. The Mexican crooner, Juan Gabriel, grew up in an orphanage in Juárez, where his mother abandoned him at the age of four. Although not a native of that border, he became its most famous and beloved native son. Flamboyant and openly effeminate in his performances, he never actually called himself gay; his response to the question of his sexual identity was “lo que se ve, no se pregunta,” a variation of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” The Noa Noa of the song was the cabaret on Juárez Avenue where he used to work as a child and where later he would give his first performance. The Noa Noa I write about here was a woman’s bar in El Paso.
- 3 “*El Noa Noa*” by Juan Gabriel. Ariola Records. 1980. See also the biopic, *El Noa Noa*, based on Juan Gabriel’s life. Directed by Gonzalo Martínez Ortega. Producciones del Rey. Producciones Alarca, 1981.
- 4 Rest in peace, Professor Lois Marchino. Thank you for being my model of an out dyke professor.
- 5 This is what my grandmother used to call a strange mix of ingredients.
- 6 “I Can See Clearly Now” by Johnny Nash. Epic Records. 1972.
- 7 The first “Tenth Muse” was the gender-queer poet, Sappho, of antiquity, baptized thus by Plato because of the sublimity of her verse. In Spanish, “décima musa” is a play on words that signifies Sor Juana’s mastery of the décima poetic form. Embedded in this pun, however, is the allusion to Sappho, signifying Sor Juana’s lesbian subtext in her many love poems written to other women.
- 8 My wife and I were married in California in 2008 and were among the first 18,000 lesbian and gay couples in the state whose marriages were not annulled by the passage of Proposition 8 in November of that year.
- 9 I should point out, however, that I don’t have a negative reaction to the words mom or mother. Since 2017, my wife and I have been the proud parents of a beautiful girl-child we named Azul because she came to us “out of the blue,” after five years of waiting for a miracle through the Los Angeles foster system. Although she used to call both of us “Mama” when she was a toddler, she had an implicit understanding that I was different from her “real Mama,” i.e., my wife. Because she sees me as both mami and papi, she calls me Mapi. Nonetheless, I still consider myself one of her moms.
- 10 TERF is an acronym that stands for Trans Exclusive Radical Feminist. TICL is my construction for Trans Inclusive Chicana Lesbian.