



**Queer
Masculinity**

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Of Muppets and Men

As I settled into my seat one night last summer to watch *Ted*, my movie companion and buddy turned to me and asked: “so...why all the films about humans and their Muppet-like friends?” What! I responded incredulously. No, no, this is an original; a one of a kind man meets teddy bear kind of thing. But my friend, a smart and perceptive guy with a keen sense of humor and an experimental edge (which led me to wonder why on earth he had agreed to come with me to this puerile comedy – my favorite genre), pushed on. “Yeah,” he said, “there’s a bunch of them.” A bunch of man-meets-Muppet films? Oh, right, I laughed, “like what else?” He paused and then said quietly: “Well, *The Muppet Movie* for one,” he said. “That was a man-meets-Muppet and man-identifies-with-Muppets movie.” Yeah...ok...true, the Muppet movie was indeed a man meets Muppet plot, but the Muppets are always an exception to every rule. There are no other “man meets Muppet-like creature” films in recent memory! Pause. My friend: “Well, there was that weird Mel Gibson sock puppet film...*The Beaver*.” Oh. Yeah. True. I had forgotten about *The Beaver*, probably because I never saw it, the whole puppet thing had sounded appealing but Mel Gibson ruined the concept for me, especially a sad and depressed Mel Gibson. I looked at my buddy with a new sense of admiration. For a guy who claims not to see a lot of movies and who prefers Indies to Hollywood films, PBS to CBS, a guy with no TV, dammit, he was on to something.

For those of you who, like me, are newly attuned to this man-meets-Muppet theme, let me explain *Ted*. *Ted* was last year’s must-see summer hit movie about a boy whose teddy bear comes to life miraculously one Christmas and then grows up to be a pot-smoking, foul-mouthed has-been who, after enjoying some small fame as a talking bear, settles into being a couch potato and leading his human friend down the road to ruin. The human in this film is one John Bennett (Mark Wahlberg) a know-nothing, do-nothing, be-nothing guy who remarkably and inexplicably has landed a gorgeous and talented girlfriend (this part of the plot is an all too familiar feature of recent *mumblecore* films and contemporary heterosexuality).

The girlfriend, Lori is played by Mila Kunis who inhabits the standard female *mumblecore* role of the long-suffering, high-achieving professional woman with low to no standards when it comes to men.

All in all, she is smart, funny, engaging, has a good heart and a baffling propensity for loyalty to losers. When Lori and *Ted*, the bear (voiced by Seth MacFarlane of *Family Guy*, who also wrote the screenplay) begin to have different aspirations for John—she wants to marry John, Ted wants to get high with John—the movie begins in earnest. Ted and Lori dance around John vying for his attention with different tactics. Ted distracts John, Lori focuses him. Ted gives him access to fun and friendship, Lori to sex and intimacy. When John finally decides that maybe he should pop the question to Lori, he tells Ted to make himself scarce saying he needs to be alone for a special night with his special girl. Ted looks at him quizzically and then asks: “first time for anal?”

Yeah, I know, only funny if you are a Beavis and Butthead type of person who sniggers helplessly at butt jokes, but the comic timing of Ted is something to be appreciated. As is his alternative, dare I say “queer,” masculinity. Foul-mouthed as he may be, and confident as he may seem in his teddy bear manliness, Ted faces a number of challenges as a masculine subject. He is a toy after all, a boy toy perhaps, but while many a woman may believe she is already dating a walking, talking mechanical toy, Ted really does live in a toy body. This comes up a couple of times in the movie to hilarious effect when we see Ted hooking up with women. While women seem to adore him, he does miss some necessary...shall we say...equipment in his quests for heterosexual fun and games. And so, when he introduces John to Norah Jones after a concert she has played at which John, Lori and Ted are all present, separately, Ted tells Norah: “you look fantastic!” She replies quickly: “you are probably not used to seeing me fully clothed.” Ted remembers now: “me and Norah met in 2002 and had awkward fuzzy sex in the coat room.” Norah finishes the story: “actually you weren’t so bad for a guy with no penis!”

A guy with no penis! Wow, you cannot get much queerer than that – transmen, butches, and intersex guys unite! While Norah’s response to Ted is obviously a punch line to a bad joke, it still invokes a wonderfully queer scene of alternative masculinity that imagines prosthetic masculinity as a reasonable alternative to bio manhood. This prosthetic masculinity also appears in *The Muppet Movie* in which men yearn to be muppets, and it comes up in *Fantastic Mr. Fox* after Mr. Fox loses his big, bushy tail and then wins it back in the form of a detachable, dry clean only accessory.

Prosthetic masculinity, in fact, is the big reveal in *Ted* and it is what makes the film charming and unique despite its lunk head emphasis on T&A and its belief in the unlimited appeal of loser guys. As we start thinking about new forms of gender in an era that has been associated with “the end of men” as Hannah Rosin calls it, Ted, Mr. Fox and the odd (very odd) muppet might be excellent role models for new brands of masculinity that come without essential relations to social power, with only tenuous relations to fatherhood and, very often, without penises.

Los Angeles, 2013

from “Beautifully Psychic”

For Paul Thek (1933-1988)

Paul was my otter. In Paris in Ponza. A wriggling road, a free dom. Dome of concurrency. Sense statement fugitive to metaphor, the assemblage. Assembling the assembled, insubstantial materials on a shifting stage.

watch out love.... prying.. “someone”

In the *documenta* of mythology, mediation of intention. I too feared discoveries, but also questioned his totality. Beyond designation, I considered the structure of fields, the space between nonidentity and reality. The art history of intensity climbed the walls, hung from the ceiling. It was victory of Dada over culture.

Take Kassel 1972: There was a rabbit too. White hare, brown here. Brown hare, white here. The ladder. Men with two feet. I crossed streets behind him. The symbolism carried there too. I wandered alone between shows. Wondered about the trees, the dinosaur, the swan.

The luscious nights of work. The open window. Potted plants, growing, not growing. German, spoken, not spoken. Why the relative dark? Candles? Wooden pegs. Never too dark for glasses, out of sun, in sun. The boat and fawn and bird. A constellation. What do we make of the man?

I asked about the pyramid of dreams. Why the dead man? Ark is Noah and airports, Viking boat and Ship of Fools, Huck’s raft and raft of the Medusa. Arks hold. The pyramid arrived from Rome, where the men congregate in summer. In exhaustion, transmission, copulation. What possibility?

The Berrigans, not Ted, not Sandy. Daniel. Philip. They stole his imagination, his mind. The war coated him in wool hats and socks. Smoke and more smoke. It rendered the world collected. Gathered, something stolen back from the anterior, if room, if courtyard.

At that time in Paris I was doing the dinosaurs.

I with, my hot valise, my cause, jointed & ambidextrous, in stop, behind a step. Behind books, consumption of cock and other digits. Libidinous bathing, I was the younger then.

Is the tomb a fetish? Perhaps. It traveled until he would have nothing to do with it. It was lost before he found it again. Never caring or never knowing caring in his care.

Since Peter, he always liked photos. He so much a photo, of the image. Never shooting, always being shot. Thin, masturbating. Naked, framed, wooden slated shot 332. Hard, tanned. Guitar in hand. Oakleyville, Fire Island, New York. Color slide, 1967. Rows of hands and fingers. Explorations in simultaneous bodies. The living and parts that (could) never live. Those of the living, those representing others who once lived, who still might live.

horror of my skin... unpleasant surface... loathing + a frustrated violence.... but also... the semblance of order + shiny functioning.

The extension of life. The intention of it. Multivalent copies and needs. Pressing, pressures that insist. Thirst.

Wrote in three pools, one of them a sea.

Conscious minded, minding. Desire mining. Rambunctious and playful, a hotel room. I too wrote about his asshole. Oh the commentary. Then ate too much. The nascent reality: he could fuck me anytime. Capitulation & isolation. Of waking & response. Sweet, capacious and loaded, this prized shot came down to a meal of trout and pork. Fantastic close-ups. Painful recollection of remembering things like toys. Gorgeous top, he kept on fucking me after he came.

hovering somewhere else... and... sick with needing to produce.

A rejection of the white gallery walls.

A spunky mess. Debris and debris. Hands touch surfaces, splinter of wood, hollow legs. Night change. Proceeding, the installations proceeded. Pulling. Wearing. Carrying. The fish, a man now, latex and covered, smothered with smelt, more aloft

then lost. God's fish, God's chicken. In coop not co-op. Into pink newspaper tunnel, hiding, hidden mise-en-scène, then render, until strewn.

My Chieftan, neither Viking nor Lord, I laid you down in sand, the grating Mediterranean agreeing. I danced in tissue. A naked lark. A wonder in the worry.

Electrial tubes and outlets, we tripped over, about, the sand within now. Waves beneath us. Light bulbs, Pied pipers, pinks and blues hueing the interior. The imagination of binary or recluse, coming out, then returning, he pushed now. I, in constant recirculation, the eddy, needing not wanting desiring ever-fulfilling & not here. A slight Jesus figured on his pupil. I left wondering what was the same.

Walking away, came home to sleep. Rendered: a move away. Tossed papers & playthings. They bothered me all the same. I remember the clothes and the breath. The St. Augustine quotes collected in the mail, an imaginary world of infinity. A diver, he showed me sleeping on a beach, drawing the water. We could walk there for miles. I took to my own tools, pens and papers, traveled to other worlds. I came through to the end. I made myself pretty, again, I found the steps to new arts, newer artists.

The journal pages, then Tatlin and Uncle Tom, restless vision. Even bath and oars were there. We ate stale toast and drank coffee. Philadelphia grew dark. His future evaporated for me, his path into a small apartment the last I knew of.

living so personalized, individualized... unbearable.

Paul grew old, grew ill. Revisiting, Susan's reading of Rilke. I saw the last show, paintings falling towards the floor. I wondered in the pink and yellow of "Afflict the Comfortable, Comfort the Afflicted." I knew he knew what he was doing. The butterflies collected, the telephone wires stretching along the dune. The taut lines to orange seas. A pink nose. A green snake lost in grasses.

Blue. Splatter. We all said words. They're lost. Quick moves of quickening letters. Heartbeats dwarfed beneath me. Processions of zee's. Z-ing, in teal.

In a Queer Skin: The Pleasures and Perils of “Call Me Gaybe”

Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe” was, without question, *the* song of summer 2012. And—fittingly for a song propelled into the national consciousness by an admiring Tweet from Justin Bieber—many a blogger pondered its charms. *New York Magazine*’s culture blog, Vulture, hailed the song as “delicious pop candy,” and breathlessly chronicled its rise. (Perhaps the best post quoted, with mock outrage, an interview where Carly admitted she has never actually given a guy her number. “Who can we trust now?” Vulture demanded.)

But what’s been less discussed is the music video’s surprisingly subversive portrayal of queer masculinity—a quality thrown into relief by one of the video’s many online parodies.

Because it may have been as long as six hours since you’ve last watched “Call Me Maybe,” let me refresh your memory: the video consists of Carly gazing out her window at a dreamy—and incredibly muscular—neighbor boy (played by model-slash-rapper Holden Nowell), who is cutting the grass shirtless. In true screwball comedy mode, she clumsily attempts to catch his eye by washing a car in her driveway while he works on a car engine nearby. Finally, she sings for him in her garage with a group of skater boys serving as her band. By now we’re all expecting for this to end in time-honored teen movie fashion: the power of her song will win his heart. And this conclusion seems assured until the video’s final moments, when Carly’s dreamy neighbor scribbles down his number at last... only to hand it to her male guitarist, who looks stunned. What a twist! The hot guy is gay, and Carly’s teenage dreams have been shattered.

Given the popularity of the video—it’s been watched more than 390 million times, making it one of YouTube’s ten most watched videos ever—imitations and parodies were inevitable. There’s a *Star Wars* version, a Cookie Monster version, and even a lip dub done by U.S. Marines. But what interests me here is a parody called “Call Me Gaybe.” Posted on May 16th of last year, “Call Me Gaybe” has since earned more than seven million views—including more than forty-three thousand “likes,” and more than six thousand “dislikes.” The video description

says simply: “Some friends having good, clean, heterosexual fun.” You can imagine how quickly I hit “play.”

On the face of it, “Call Me Gaybe” seems to have little in common with the original other than a suburban setting. From its opening image of a cute shirtless guy working on an engine, however, “Gaybe” responds to the original video’s twist ending, imagining a landscape suddenly alive with boys doing very gay things: looking lustfully at one another shirtless, stroking one another’s arms, and skipping down the street together. The twist here is that the actors are all actually straight, and so all their flirting and frolicking is a wacky joke.

Initially this might sound charming to watch, and maybe even liberating for its straight participants. NPR’s Ann Powers seems to think so: in an article on “Call Me Maybe” parodies on YouTube, she writes, “a surprising number of [these] parodies feature guys who mostly read straight (in the sexual and more broadly cultural sense of the word) getting in touch with their inner femininity, and even queerness, by falling in love with Jepsen’s song.” The video’s viewers often seem to agree with this kind of celebratory reading; one (presumably queer) viewer even commented, “I wish all straight guys [were] this cool”... and forty-nine people agreed when they “liked” the comment. A part of me wishes I could believe them. But, as I’ll explain, I think something more conservative is going on here.

The ending of the original video is only a surprise because Carly’s love interest hasn’t been coded as gay—and by this I mean “effeminate,” in keeping with the mainstream media’s predominant depictions of gay men. Quite the opposite, in fact: he’s a sexy bro cutting grass and working on his car, participating in all the stock summertime enterprises of teenage straight boys in suburbia. With their frolicking, skipping, and ladylike undulations, however, the “Gaybe” boys set out to reestablish the links between effeminacy and gayness. They invoke old stereotypes in order to clearly mark the differences between a gay male body and their own—differences that Carly’s neighbor threatens to erase by being both conventionally masculine *and* queer. In response to the idea that queerness might be invisible, that it could surprise you, the boys of “Call Me Gaybe” insist that queerness is always obvious—and, furthermore, that it’s ridiculous. The video’s humor, after all, comes from the deep-rooted belief in Western culture that for a man to act like a woman is absurd: amusing at best and shameful at worst. (For

evidence of this, we need only think back to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, where a suicidal Romeo is told his tears are "womanish" and that he is an "Unseemly woman in a seeming man" [3.3.110-2].) In "Call Me Gaybe," then, women and gay men are the ones parodied—ironically enough, the same audience members who often comment to express their admiration and desire for the boys on the screen.

In a way, Ann Powers is right: the video's premise is liberating insofar as it allows the boys to prance and undulate and touch one another—to use their bodies in ways that straight men aren't supposed to in our culture. They get to wear—for a few uneasy and thrilling minutes—a queer skin. But the pleasures of being in this skin come always at the expense of women and actual queers, whose bodies and bearings are held up for the audience's laughter. Ultimately, then, although parodies are usually seen as inherently subversive, the original "Call Me Maybe" says more surprising things about gender and sexuality—especially the potentially unreadable sexuality of young queer men—than does the sexy but sad "Call Me Gaybe."

Candy, Again

I wonder what Candy looked like to them – I tried my best to describe her as small, and because I was maybe 12 or so, or just turned 13, I had near zero baritone in my voice, and the reaction to understanding who she looked like was connected to the lie of her existing in my voice in the first place. I think I said I had long dark hair, and tried to sound thin, maybe revealed my real skin color, hair down to the middle of my back, what would a boy know? Do I misunderstand the site of the lie, now? Does the lie inflect itself around the need in wanting to get fucked before this could be imagined as possible in my own body, or the risk in knowing that I then, pre-caller ID, could be traced *69, and sometimes was, a call back caller shouting, “Who is this!?!?” and I would not answer, and nor would Candy. We, in an instant, could both be not there.

Perhaps I am comfortable now, in language, because of this lie, the exercise in working between the lie and the amorphousness and control of that body connected to the possibility in this collaborative fiction, me, with this other, the choice in designing the receptive self, serving as a space in the imagination where who could become could also be radically undone when my mother came home, say with her friend, Nebraska, the house scent-rich with my boy cum – “What’s that smell?,” and I said I made some clams for lunch, something I don’t think I ate, or I may have even said I made oysters, also something I had never eaten then, and wherever would I get them was forgotten as they cooked lunch, my mother showing off by making steak.

At the Belmont Hotel, they are so beautiful these lovers in the window left open as an obvious display, and this beauty is tied to a kind of thinking that presupposes the sun that must frame my face, that can also be seen against the headboard, especially if I prop up the pillow. I think to myself, maybe I can blend into it, though I realize I am not as dark as this varnish, but I think if I lean back, I am actually dark enough, dark enough to camouflage myself into this room, entire.

Maybe I can look into the self as a wall, a way back, into and not being seen in the room where I am? They, too, pull the blind closed, just enough for them to be shrouded by the sun and its shadows, where I can see their figures through the window. They realize, I am fairly certain, that they have shown it all, her, a bob, her kissing him, a grey head and large cock, him playing with it behind the Macbook Pro screen, the bitten off white apple, logo that both calms and blocks

my view, though I can see his hands jack, and she reclines, or lazily expands in the show, here in the room, then there, and I am hiding out of sight looking in and at, but pretending to be writing, or maybe I am writing, or looking as if this is so, then I will get up in my yoga shorts and stretch, to feign my glancing towards them, then at an angle away.

At dawn, on a street I do not remember the name of, I am in one of my customer's yards, and this is pre-Candy, but full on Paper-Boy, horned up and looking into windows, seeking men before they go to work. I move back and don't notice one pulling the blind back. Nothing is said, nothing spoken, and I'm driven by Spivak a bit here, where she describes the possibility in the subaltern's consciousness, and how this is caught.... *The sender – 'the peasant' [is] marked only as a pointer to the irretrievable consciousness. As for the receiver, we must ask who is 'the real receiver' of an 'insurgency?....'*¹ This is not a history, and I do not quite know how to mark who is so named as the pointer or the one pointed toward, but I did feel like I needed some way to mark who I was in my desire for whom I knew I could never have, the mystery in figuring how to mark the space between us.

If the man on my route readying himself for work came outside, after busting me, my lie was that I would say that I threw the paper in the bushes, that I went to retrieve it, and got curious. And when the curtains parted, and he looked out to see me, he just shook his head, "No," and looked down at me. Nothing happened after that, no call, no communication other than him above me, and me feeling a coolness in my chest, an open feeling twinned with the morning air.

The Prank Call. The Peeping Tom. I was also the Bike Riding Boy on his elementary school grounds, riding between the classes and bungalows, pulling his pants down to ride in the school, my naked 6th grade asshole on the BMX seat, the paper carrier bag draped on me, and my cock out, long and hard into the fresh blue light.

And as I look out across the windows, I am also looking, as a boy, up, and down into another man, and his lover, through the events rendering me alive, and at the same time, in a way sexually useless, inert in my movement, so that when the couple appears in the lobby, and the daddy says "Hello, how are you?" and the wife does too, I am unable to act beyond my own, "Hello, how are you?" all of us as neutral as we are aware.

* * *

1. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Editors Cary Nelson and Lawrence Goldberg, London: Macmillan, 1988.

Except from 49: Considering Coldness North of the 49th Parallel

February 2, 2012
Haukijarvi, Finland

“Now you must have no more kisses,” she said, “or I shall kiss you to death.”

Hans Christian Anderson, *The Snow Queen*

In Iceland, I put my hand inside a man. It was a sexual act. He lived in a black tower overlooking the sea. Snow crowned the mountains, and out his window the Aurora pulled its ragged curtain of light across the night sky. It is interesting to feel the bones move inside a man. Interesting too his pulse. I cannot say I was sexually stimulated, rather the atmosphere was stimulating. You must understand, I was being generous; I followed his instructions carefully and with something resembling love. I wore a latex glove and nothing else. His bedroom was spare and elegant in the Nordic fashion, and he kept the chains of his sling tightened with tape, so the ringing of the links would remain unobstrusive. In drawers with pads to prevent slippage his tools were arranged as precious objects. Sweet were his lips and sweet the taste of night, skin white and warm, flushed pink at the neck. How had I come to this bony island heated by molten rock, hand in a man above my wrist? I imagined myself reading, alone or with a cat balled on my lap, little body and brain familiar to the fingers. Later, we stood on the street as morning broke against the shore, having reassembled our faces. He touched my coat. When Petur spoke, he stammered and I leaned closer so as to better attend his mouth.

February 3, 2012
Haukijarvi, Finland

*the boat's on a pike's shoulders
on a water-dog's haunches!*

The Kalevala—*Elias Lönnrot*

Miners, understanding the cold, reached the bottom of the lake by removing one centimeter of ice a day. Each night the lake would freeze below it and another inch was chipped away. After a time, the ice stairs could be used and precious metals drawn from the sandy floor. At night, the lake would glow from lanterns burning under ice.

In Helsinki, a man fed me a piece of pike from the silver tines of a fork. He held it forward and I had to reach out my tongue to keep it from falling. The morsel was fine and nourished the senses. We spoke the common tongue, which was my own, and that night he clucked his tongue in a sound of pleasure as I pushed inside him—no language, muscle sucked with its secrets and accents, which is the sound of the land held in the mouth.

People stream to the tram, babies in down sacks in their prams and white fur, pushed through the cold like Romanovs. They smile at their keepers with faces from ikons.

J, I lit a candle for your ailing spine, one for your lungs, one for your serrated tongue. The Patriarchs stared as I touched the wick to the oil aflame in its central ring. I bought the beeswax candles from a young man wearing an old man's suit, which was tan and showed its age at the elbows. He made change on a little tray so as not to touch my hand.

Each day, the sun grows a little stronger, but I relish the bitter bite in my nostrils, my eyelashes crisped white beneath a ruff of fox.

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