

My Hot Toddler

Orna Guralnik, Psy.D.

New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis

This is a commissioned attempt to *think-about* the intense and intimate reactions my hypertypical toddler, Jasper, evokes with his capable and beautiful body and mind. It is a short meditation on desire, sexuality, gender, and maternal love through the dialectical frame of feminism, queer sensibility, and the dreaded essentialism.

Jasper is very particular about kisses. On a rare occasion he may hold your face with both hands and stick an exploring tongue in your mouth, eying you to inspect the aftershocks of his probes. But most of the time “it’s too much!!” and “don’t touch my body!”—he allots us very few kisses. Aware of his human rights, and of the hunger his capable body, red lips, and dark features evoke,¹ he plays us.

He struts, Jasper. His little chest and shoulders are decorated with tiny sculpted muscles, *full metal jacket*. Hips leading, he walks with a swagger, imaginary pistols dangling on each side, arms puffed up, and a score of steel drums always in the background. People often comment about his deep raspy voice; “I hit you! I kill you! You die!!” He seems to know something about his power, Jasper.² A toddler? Power, Sex, and Aggression in a splendid bricolage. He is stunning in his ways; a self-assured, crazy handsome, charismatic little guy, he commands his world. I have noticed that even his schoolteacher has taken to a particular morning greeting; leaning against the classroom door, she narrows her eyes into a sly smile and seductively slurs, “Hey handsome . . .”—an invitation Jasper usually squirms away from. For a split second she

¹Linda Baker (2005) had a good piece in *The New York Times* on muzzling her sensual desire for her children. The desiring maternal gaze is always at risk of being interpellated into the cultural archetype of the Manchurian Candidate’s mother, a perversely possessive female/maternal gaze that castrates rather than charges.

²The truth is, masculinity, and especially Jasper’s masculinity, unravels me. I do not know what masculinity means or is. It deranges my *to-the-bone* belief that we are polymorphously male, female, and the many variations in between those binaries. When I am not referring to Jasper, I think of masculine and feminine as categories that typically quietly serve top:bottom or win:lose paradigms and power distributions while foreclosing the variegations that come with multiple identifications.

I do not know how to organize myself in response to Jasper’s roars of war, his intense pleasure in imagining killing living creatures, or his attacks on my body. Is my resort to thinking “gender” an offensive mistake? Am I better off to engage the language of Kleinian phantasies?

Whether a Kleinian or masculine toddler, I want to send him for conversion therapy. I want what David Brooks (2012, p. A23), protested against: a “nurturing, collaborative, disciplined, neat, studious, industrious and ambitious” little prince. I am so deeply aware of my responsibilities as his mother: there to support him, contain, mentalize, and interpellate whatever he is going through in the hope of a solid base of self-definition.

Correspondence should be sent to Orna Guralnik, Psy.D., 270 Lafayette Street, Suite 1209, New York, NY 10012. E-mail: oma@lucid-consulting.com

looks to me like a hooker at the door, soliciting. But then the charge softens: “What do you want to work on today, sweetie?” she asks, and we enjoy his innocence together.³

I am forever anticipating that day in which my “reactions” to Jasper, our many reads of him—sexy, menacing, cute, mischievous—will *Nachträglich* assume the status of traumatic misrecognitions, charging his unconscious with gender and sexual trauma.⁴ Having been commissioned to write this essay, I asked myself to suspend the double vision a parent is always busy with, forever trying to imagine how Jasper might be experiencing it all from within his developing internal world. Instead, folding inward, I decided on a deliberate effort to notice the ways in which boyhood, sexuality, and aggression infuse my experience of Jasper.

As sexy as this little dude looks in his Superman vintage T-shirt, his hair dark and messy, the full power of his *appeal*, of his sex appeal, bursts through when he puts on a princess dress. The pink one, coveted by so many in his nursery classroom. And mostly the boys. The sparkles bring out the best of him. Oh my, he is so good looking.⁵ I Instagram him repeatedly, trying to capture and frame something elusively marvelous with the camera, hoping my social media audience will tell me: *How is it that he looks so masculine in drag?*

Jasper is different in the morning, when he wakes up. He’s in a rare state of surrender, a warm body still soft in dreams. His vulnerability interpellates me into that easy mother, the *uncomplicating good mother*, flowing with the kind of radical affection only very young dependents can evoke. I pick him up and carry his body into the world, his entire being slumped on my shoulder, molding, trusting. Stolen moments. There’s no need to *think-about* anything. Thinking-about seems redundant with a soft body on your shoulder. But within minutes he is armed with that roar of toddler energy that makes me want to flee, seek shelter among the bonobos.⁶ I want to run, but I stick it out with Jasper. There is no matriarchal alternative society. We are here, in the patriarchal capitalist West, getting dressed for another day at our progressive and expensive private school. I stay with his roars.

I think about his roars so I can stay.

I think in language, in discourse. And thinking-about is when some trouble begins. Form and category shape experience into meaning. Thinking-about invites, translates, interpellates, and forecloses. And when masculinity becomes a signifier, an abyss of Butlerian trouble opens up (Butler, 2006).

³Kristeva’s (2005) maternal passion operates a transformation of the libido in such a way that sexualization is deferred by a tendency toward tenderness.

⁴The parental gaze charges the young unconscious with enigmatic meanings. Here the \$30 million lawsuit against Warner Bros., AOL, and Associated Newspapers over *Toddlers & Tiaras* comes to mind; portraying the 3-year-old Isabella Barrett as “gyrating” to “I’m Sexy and I Know It,” they were accused that “the presentation of a child’s sex appeal was *libelous* insofar as it was malicious or reckless to post articles about a child who couldn’t understand the concept of sex” (Gardner, 2012).

⁵This is tinged with, but different from, the kind of maternal desire de Marneffe (2005) talks about. de Marneffe attempts to bring into discourse about mothers and children the mothers’ wants, focusing on the embodied, aching desire to be with their children. I swoon with Jasper. But it’s a state of being possessed, not a state of self-expression.

⁶The bonobo is popularly known for its high levels of sexual behavior. Sex functions in conflict appeasement, affection, social status, excitement, and stress reduction. It occurs in virtually all partner combinations and in a variety of positions. This is a factor in the lower levels of aggression seen in the bonobo when compared with the common chimpanzee and other apes. Bonobos are perceived to be matriarchal; females tend to collectively dominate males by forming alliances and use sexuality to control males. A male’s rank in the social hierarchy is often determined by his mother’s rank. Along with the common chimpanzee, the bonobo is the closest extant relative to humans.

Truth is, to confuse my feminist-queer sensibilities, this roar of his seems so darn *masculine*. Yes, *male*. Wait, but I honestly do not believe we have any access to what is essential about our nature. Masculine? Feminine? We have benefited from three feminist waves and two queer ones; I have been humbly convinced that all “clues” about *the nature of things* are always-already heavily saturated with ideology, gender being the most obvious of them. But Jasper manages to confuse me. Not his singularity. But how to think-about, signify, who he is and what he evokes. “He’s such a Boy” is the common reaction teachers and friends have to him, *exactly* the kind of comment I hate. And resonate with when I see him run, run, and bang-bang, and pow-pow! “I hit you! I kill you! You die!!”

Sigh. “What do you mean he’s So-Boy?!? And when my daughter did that...”?⁷ I am perplexed. What language can I use to describe his body operating in space and on me? Is pow-pow or run-run gendered? Was there ever a pregendered Jasper? Was he pow-powed into boyhood by us, his interpellaters? Have his movements been choreographed into his DNA centuries ago, or has he already met enough of us to know the dance of masculinity?

He notices every detail about me. “Hey mom, you have a boo-boo? . . . Hey, you fixed your glasses!” He carefully observes and incorporates the entire choreography of how I speak and move. My hair ties, he absolutely must wear my hair ties, and as many bracelets as he can pile on his soft wrists. A classic, Fast-Benjamin overinclusive toddler (Benjamin, 1988), he does not distinguish between boys and girls, lip gloss from shovel. It’s all taken in by his eyes, rehearsed and performed by his body. He handles body lotion and blush with the same exact curiosity and devotion as a screwdriver and hammer: weapons of mass seduction. Jasper’s playground. Of course he can *do-femininity* if he so wants. Yet somehow, most objects—a piece of toast or the arm of a doll—will ultimately find their way to represent a gun: “Pow-pow, I kill you!” As he performs masculinity, and makes me an object of observation, a subtle scene keeps developing between us. He owns his gaze, and I enjoy the attention. Café Müller (Bausch, 1978) between toddler and mom. We somehow come to dance, rehearse, and clash our genders.

I find his ways maddening. He can move his body through space with little concern for what he meets on his way to the imaginary *Bad Guy* he is fighting. All cars seem to have been designed to smash into ambulances. There is such a power to this little person, forward, out, up and on top! I am amazed but then overwhelmed: “Help! Too much destruction!” It gets easier for me when he turns to verbally share the story he’s caught in, his voice swelling with excitement, the words coming out frustratingly slow and failing to contain his action:⁸ “Bad Guy tied me up! Me stuck!” In reporting about what his body is engaged in, he invites me to jump into his movie, the big sky story of good and bad guys, of cowboys and firemen, of fairness and victory.⁹ He never wants to be the good guy or the savior. He wants *me* to be

⁷My daughter used to also want to dismantle and cut me to pieces. Her love and aggression were some sort of passionate mix. When I try to distill what feels different there was both less movement in space and plenty of other ways of relating too. Or perhaps I feared her aggression less? Liked it more? Wanted it for her?

⁸What Kristeva (2005) terms maternal “de-passioning” that enables the child’s language acquisition might be what helps me resume easier maternal functions, or a thirdness that keeps me a safe guardian for Jasper. The mother must sublimate her own loving and hateful passions to allow and take pleasure in her child’s capacity to create his own language.

⁹What Corbett (2009) compassionately describes as “invitations toward complementary bigness” (p. 203).

the *good guys*, abandoning him to the freedom and frenzy of kicking, burning, and smashing us to pieces. “Ha-Ha!” his victorious voice. The passion in his destruction is intoxicating but never fails to elicit waves of dis-ease in me. I try to join him: “You are so strong. Wow! Your body can fly, you can kill!!” I offer myself reassuring thoughts: He’s a *boy*, working on the translation of testosterone to mind. “Yeah, babies don’t do that!” he chimes, proudly. I continue sketching my portrait: That’s how *they* are, boys. I imagine him a teenager on the hockey field and the girls going crazy for his body.¹⁰ *What am I doing??* I seem compelled to frame who we are to each other through the lens of phallic narcissism and its common sibling: domination (Benjamin, 1988; Corbett, 2009). He’s the emerging little man, and I’m the admiring/desiring albeit frightened, mommy. I know this skit. Yet inevitably I can’t stay in role and curtail the number of doll and teddy bear homicides; “Teddy is hurt—why don’t you go check on him?” I want mutuality → Jasper is disappointed. This is *No Fun*. Who are we? And what is my job here? A hypernormative toddler to a queer (castrating) mother? Power, Sex, Gender, and Aggression seeking meaning in a splendid intersubjective bricolage.

Jasper is a born rocker with the guitar. He strums, he rocks, he sings the blues. Cocking his head to listen to the strings his fierce eyes grow darker and deeper. He can watch YouTube videos of solo male guitarists forever; Neil Young, Kurt Vile, even Andy McKee. We stare at him, drinking the sight of his small body mirroring his elder idols to perfection. Fueled by our gaze he stands up for a full body Hendrix blowout. He sings, he plays, he is. There’s so much passion circling through and around him. It’s chaotic, risqué, urgent, and enigmatic. His passion seems to demand being interpellated by form. It asks to come into meaning between us. Is there a way to experience seduction, desire, or aggression with no reference to gender?¹¹ I am baffled. Enthralled. He is so darn good looking and I am helplessly possessed.

REFERENCES

- Baker, L. (2005, December 4). Mother must muzzle the nuzzle. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/04/fashion/sundaystyles/04LOVE>
- Bausch, P. (1978). *Café Müller* [dance piece].
- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. New York, NY: Pantheon.
- Brooks, D. (2012, July 5). Honor code. *The New York Times*, p. A23.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge Classics.
- Corbett, K. (2009). *Boyhoods: Rethinking Masculinities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- de Marnette, D. (2005). *Maternal Desire: On Children, Love, and the Inner Life*. New York, NY: Bay Books.
- Gardner, E. (2012, November 5). TMZ pulls down ‘sexy’ child star video to settle lawsuit. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved from <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/tmz-pulls-down-toddlers-tiaras-386394>
- Kristeva, J. (2005). *Maternal passion*. Retrieved from <http://www.kristeva.fr/motherhood.html>

¹⁰Of course the boys will be going crazy for him too—but that is a different chapter in this story.

¹¹Is sexualizing a boy a way to manage his aggression? I know that maneuver too well, being a woman objectified by men exactly at the moment when power is at play. Will gendering a toddler make their aggression more seductive? Or perhaps it’s when he is so seductive that I can’t help but gender him? The sexualization of Otherness is another question to ponder, a way to colonize with desire what is perplexing.

AUTHOR BIO

Orna Guralnik, Psy.D., is a clinical psychologist on faculty at the Trauma Studies program of the National Institute for the Psychotherapies and at New York University (NYU). She teaches and publishes on the topic of dissociation, culture, and psychoanalysis. She was one of the founders of the Center for the Study of Depersonalization at Mount Sinai School of Medicine and recipient of NARSAD, NIH, Wollstein, and Harris grants. She is on the editorial board of *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, an advanced candidate at the NYU Postdoctoral Program in Psychoanalysis, and the mother of two children.