Title
Alchemy of feelings: Loss, laughter, eros, and new gender subjectivities

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5nr8d947

Author
McCullen, Christie

Publication Date
2012-04-18

License
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
Alchemy of feelings: Loss, laughter, eros, and new gender subjectivities.
Christie McCullen - Sociology PhD Student, UC Santa Cruz

“The lights were low, all the candles on fertility altar lit, the mood—just right. Maddy pulled out all her blowjob tricks—the pepper grinder, the text message, the piccolo tickolo. Leroy was overcum with ecstasy as he spunked into a cup.” So begins the pornographic performance entitled Maddy & Leroy’s Artifuckial Insemination, a kinky tale of a heterosexual couple’s experience with an artificial insemination. It proceeds like this: Leroy spanks and doses Maddy with a hormonal supplement, Maddy orgasms first upon hearing that her insurance pays for the hormones and then several times more after being double-teamed by two female doctors wielding a vibrating, sperm-injecting turkey baster. As the author narrates the story from the side, an exotic dancer playfully strips off a lab coat and bra, flosses between her legs with a stethoscope, and shoots white liquid out of a syringe. And all along everyone laughs because—clearly—none of this is hot…or is it?

I can imagine seemingly opposable reasons to find humor in this piece. First, it could be funny because of its absurdity, or in other words, because it’s so obviously not true. No one expects that Maddy would repeatedly achieve orgasms from the most sterile, mundane medical procedures of sitting in waiting rooms, communicating with insurance companies, receiving large doses of hormones, and being inseminated by a machine. Cultural tropes of sacredness abound in imaginations of heterosexual couples “trying” to get pregnant. At the very least, this type of sex is represented as emotionally intimate, an act that consecrates their love for one another and their commitment to a life together. In more religious and ideological renderings, this sexual act represents the perfect union of two human halves—man and woman—who in their intercourse recreate humanity and society. Judith Butler (1990) refers to the latter as the
heterosexual matrix, an overarching idea from which hegemonic sexual and gender roles stem.

Given these tropes, the scientific and mechanical intervention of an artificial insemination threatens to transform the sacred act of making love to make a baby into a profane act of making insemination to make a fetus. To call that sexy or emotionally satisfying would be absurd. Laughter at absurdity serves as proof of a collective abjection (Limon 2000) of this medical cyborg sex—it’s disgusting, sad, cold.

Because our emotions are relational (Ahmed 2000), people tend to project those collective emotions about sacred sex onto the people going through an artificial insemination. Following Sylvan Tomkins’ (Sedgwick & Frank 1995) assertion that shame always relates to interest, Ahmed explains that shame results when individuals who feel interested and invested in social norms fail to live up to those social ideals and thus retreat inwardly in shame. Perhaps because of the social ideals of sacred sex, there’s a social will to outwardly grieve that loss of sacred procreation and as a result, we expect emotional performances of shame, sadness, depression, and disgust from those couples who seemingly fail at the social ideal. Indeed, Ferber (1995) finds that women dealing with infertility struggle immensely with feelings of shame, “gender confusion” and “lowered libido” (437). Infertility signifies a loss of femininity for them. So just as there is apparently nothing sexy about an artificial insemination, we don’t expect one to be funny either; infertility is far from a laughing matter—it’s serious, sad, shameful, private, and problematic. Ahmed suggests that shame is an individual experience that occludes the social source of its pain (in this case, those ideals of sacred sex) and that public feelings of shame strengthen the violated norms. Artifuckial Insemination defies those emotional expectations of performing pain when Maddy finds nothing but pleasure in her artificial insemination and we laugh in part from that surprise and incongruence with social ideals. People may find humor
from the absurdity of its premise—its lack of shame and pain are so obviously not “true” or aligned with social ideals. Laughter at this absurdity can reproduce those norms of sacred sex even as it finds momentary reprieve from that pain.

So the first reason I see for finding humor in *Artifuckial Insemination* is the absurdity of the character’s lack of shame. But I also imagine that people might laugh *at that shame* and rather than reproducing the normalizing effects of that shame, this form of laughing can transgress those norms and further resistance to them too. Ahmed (2000) writes that the fear of shame is what keeps people attached to social ideals and norms, so *laughing at shame* performs a certain emotional alchemy towards that shame—if one resists the inward retreat of shame *by publicly laughing at it*, then that shame can’t continue to drive people to reproduce those norms through their private suffering. Shame can be a starting point for something else (see Sedgwick & Frank (1995) and Cvetkovich (2003) for more examples of productive uses of shame).

I would like to suggest that laughter can result because the unexpected pleasure performed in *Artifuckial Insemination* reveals emotional excesses and undeveloped possibilities that exist within heterosexual sex. Within the heterosexual matrix norm, sex exists for the purpose of reproduction of the species and society. Yet despite this ideal, we know that it is tenuous—heterosexual people attach far more meanings to their sexual relations including pleasure, intimacy, competition, fear, boredom, etc. *Artifuckial Insemination* speaks to some of these other(ed) meanings and even expands possibilities for heterosexual desires to include pansexual arousal, polyamory, promiscuity, and cyborg penetration. The performance makes no mention of shame, pain, or disgust; instead it only suggests pleasure and satisfaction. While this absence of explicit shame could indicate the ideological basis for its humor (i.e., in the Althusserian sense of the problematic), it could also indicate changing norms around
heterosexual relationships. Perhaps *Artifuckial Insemination* is funny not because it’s absurd, but because it *could be true* or a lot of people want it to be widely accepted as true. The abundance of medical kinks also provide some proof for why some may find the funny because of its sexual truths. Cultural stories abound of parents finding children exploring their bodies and sexuality through “playing doctor” and sexy nurse costumes serve as a Halloween staple.

But while vulnerability plays a part in some of these Western medicine kinks—such as disrobing in front of a clothed, authoritative figure—these kinky role plays do not revolve around the medical procedures associated with *great loss*, such as infertility or death. Telling a sexy tale related to such loss crosses an emotional boundary—loss is not normally both hot and funny, but the emotional ambivalence of asserting that it is makes for a perfect comedic premise. Yet the juxtaposition of laughter and loss also brings attention to the underdeveloped emotional possibilities that still exist within this story of infertility. Ann Cvetkovich (2003) argues that people experience trauma in far more diverse and ambivalent ways than grief, sadness, depression, and anger. Rather than calling them contradictory emotions, she asserts that experiences of trauma manifest in more affectively complicated and ambivalent ways than we commonly associated with trauma. This more diverse “archive of feelings” of trauma includes emotions such as joy, elation, exhilaration, boredom, and love. The joy people find in *Artifuckial Insemination* could also be evidence of this more diverse archive of feelings of fertility loss. As one audience member recalled to me, “Turkey basting is just funny.” Moreover, because of the normative will to grieve all loss, finding humor and pleasure within the context of an artificial insemination can help couples cope with the loss of fertility. The will to grieve makes the

---

1 While I do not mean to equate an artificial insemination with the same magnitude of trauma described by Cvetkovich (i.e., that of genocide, rape, or incest), I do suggest that fertility loss is a form of trauma, in that many women struggling with infertility find it to be deeply distressing (Ferber 1995).
experience of infertility a private, quiet one that socially isolates the couple going through the process. Finding humor in the situation can help couples resist that isolating feeling.

Laughing at fertility loss and laughing with the kinkiness of medical intervention can also help couples resist the totalizing effect that an artificial insemination can have on a couple’s sex life and the individuals’ feelings about sex. In order for artificial inseminations and other fertility treatments to work, couples have to be very exacting about their sexual encounters. For example, masturbation must happen within a short window of fertility and the sperm needs to be quickly processed before it becomes inactive. Sex within this context often becomes a chore, something completely detached from emotional bonds, erotic imagination, and physical satisfaction. It’s about making a fetus and thus it risks the loss of other associations with sex. 

*Artifuckial Insemination*’s storyline and accompanying stripper insist on the sexiness of this medical sex process, reminding couples of the other aspects of their sexuality that they can control and be empowered by, such as finding pleasure, emotional connection, and fantasy in their sex lives. I worry that the trouble getting pregnant and the turn to fertility treatment might cause women who have previously had diverse associations with their sex lives beside fertility to forget their more empowering and independent associations with sex such as entertainment, pleasure, and release. Instead, sex just becomes an act of procreation. Forgetting these associations with sex, women can lose sight of the non-heteronormative associations with sex that have been forged by decades of feminism.

Sara Ahmed (2000) asserts that encounters between people produce emotions that, through repetition, constitute subjects. Building off of Ahmed, I suggest that the feelings of mirth and eros that arise in *Artifuckial Insemination* add to the production of emerging heterosexual subjectivities that reject the heterosexual matrix notions of reproducing the nation,
society, and humanity through heterosexual coupling. How do I believe that this happens emotionally? Laughter produces mirth in audience members that keep them interested in the story and drawn to the pleasures that Maddy feels. Her pleasure and happiness is contagious and her pleasure becomes their pleasure. *Humor then is erotic*—it draws the performers and the audience together through mutual interest and pleasure. In other words, humor is a form of flattery (Hurley et al. 2010). Moreover, the accompanying stripe tease amplifies the erotic pleasure they take in the performance. As such, the audience becomes erotically hailed by the strip tease; they are interested in what turns Maddy on and they want to ensure that she stays turned on so they can keep enjoying the show.

I think that this humor and eros have implications for changing heterosexual subjectivities. The dynamism of eroticism makes it a site of power, a relationship through which people become subjects for one another. Like Althusser’s hailing (1994), this making of subjects happens through recognition and language, but the erotic hailing I suggest understands power differently than Althusser. In Althusser’s formulation of ideology, a person becomes an ideological subject when she responds to recognition and address. “Hey! You!” says the police office and the civilian answers, “Yes?” The moment she responds, she is “hailed” as a subject and she becomes a civilian, someone who the police officer ostensibly protects and against whom he may use force. In other words, her response enters her into ideology and its uneven power relations. For Althusser, this hailing is the both the beginning and end of the story because as soon as she is hailed she will become a cog in the machine of oppressive social relationships. If Althusser had it right, *Artifuckial Insemination* would only be funny because it is so obviously is not true. But isn’t there another way of *being for another* that involves more love, dynamism, and mutual interest?
I would like to save Althusser’s understanding of subject making through recognition and address, but add more possibility for the effects of that. After all, in addition to the “Hey! You!” hailing, there’s also the “Heeey youuu” of mutual interest and attraction. The latter is the erotic hailing—a great source of possibilities and dynamic subject making where subjects are not simply paired in domination-subjugation roles but engage instead in a constant push and pull. Mimi Schippers (2002) describes this type of erotic hailing in her notion of contradictory subjects. These subjects attract others by first performing normative cultural practices and then jarring others’ expectations by adding transgressive cultural practices to the normative ones. The ambiguities of their performances destabilize the expected norms and expand the possibilities for their subjectivity. *Artifuckial Insemination* does this erotic hailing through contradictory subjectivity by attracting the audience with a conventionally sexy stripper and then surprising the audience with her non-normative desires and her confident, unabashed quest to fulfill them. The simultaneity of attraction and dissonance challenges the audience to accept something new. In that moment of instability, new possibilities flood in, and for a moment, everyone feels good.

**Reference List**


