

# **PLAYFUL SEXUALITY; A NEW ATTITUDE FOR FEMINIST SEXUAL ETHICS**

DANIEL S GLUCH

FALL 2014

Katherine MacKinnon condemns female sexuality as inescapably oppressive as it was constructed by men for them to exploit for their own pleasure. The difficulty imagining a non-oppressive female sexuality has led radical feminists to take a restrictive position on sex that condemns acts ranging from heterosexual intercourse to the use of dildos in lesbian sex. In reaction to the restrictive position of radical feminists, a sex-positive feminist movement which Ferguson characterizes as the libertarian position focused on the need for mutual consent. However, many of the mutually consented to expressions of sexual liberation reinforce the sexual norms that degrade, devalue, objectify, and exploit women. The debate, so far, has focused on the structures and relationships in which sex occurs and the acts animated in those relations. There has been little discourse on the attitudes taken in sex and its role in either liberating or perpetuating the oppressive sexual norms. In this paper I will draw on Maria Lugones' account of playfulness to reframe the Sex Wars debate and argue that a playful attitude in sex can allow for freedom in sexual expression without dismissing the harmfulness of the sexual norms currently constructed.

MacKinnon argues that sexuality is the primary sphere of female oppression, and that sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjugation of women. Male power constructs and makes real that female sexuality exists as being for another. The norms of a sexuality built on objectification where man fucks woman - subject verb object - are all inherently problematic. She identifies some of the

problematic sexual norms as they are seen woven into our ideas of women and femininity; being valued by their attractiveness and availability to men, characterized by receptivity and disabled resistance, an infantilization that evokes pedophilia while also prohibiting the ability to see women as adults, a fixation on dismembered body parts, and a weak vulnerability that is symbolized by being pregnable to something hard and strong. Her claim is that without a change to these norms, "the liberation of women is a meaningless goal." A sexuality that objectifies and devalues women constructs and makes real the social power structures that oppress women.<sup>1</sup> This leaves a limited number of sex acts in a limited number of relationships as possibly permissible.

Sex positive feminists have attempted to unproblematize the variety of relationships and sexual practices condemned by the radical feminists. Their claim is that female sexuality has been oppressed insofar as it has always been restricted, and that greater freedom of expression is required for liberation.<sup>2</sup> The focus of sexual morality was shifted away from relationship type and specific sexual acts onto whether or not mutual consent was present. Women fulfilling the human need for sex in the context of mutual consent became the Good.

---

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the history of penetration symbolizing dominance that ranges from traditions spanning Judeo-Christianity to the contemporary gay community always creates a power imbalance in the community that privileges the penetrator and oppresses the penetrated.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen 76

However, MacKinnon claims that more sex cannot liberate. More sex only increases their accessibility to men, places more emphasis on their need to be attractive, and allows (briefly) for women to emulate the masculine role of objectifying another while remaining object. The oppressive norms were only strengthened by women having more sex, shown by an increase of rape, violence against women, and objectification through pornography in reaction to the women's sexual liberation movement.

The debate was at an impasse, and without a reframing, progress would not be made.<sup>3</sup> I believe the current debate is problematic in that both sides universalize claims on sexual morality (i.e. All instances and reanimations of oppressive sexual norms are always wrong based on the nature of relationships or sexual acts. Or, no sexual expression freely consented to can be considered problematic). Universal claims about sexuality are problematic because sex is not static, but fluid. The same sexual act within the same relationship can at some times be unproblematic and at different times be objectifying or degrading. A theory of liberation from sexual oppression needs to account for this fluidity that universal claims about relationships, structures, sexual acts, and consent cannot.<sup>4</sup> Placing the attitude in sex as the primary consideration in handling sexual oppression avoids this by claiming that all sex acts,

---

<sup>3</sup> There were many different theories as to what kind of reframing would be successful; Marxism, modes of sexual/affective production, political struggle, and self-reflective practices that acknowledges the interrelatedness of public/private (among others I am sure).

<sup>4</sup> The universalizing approach also violates certain mandates of feminist theory and practice. Both MacKinnon (75) and Mohanty (19) argue that feminism must question and counter universalizing and totalizing imperatives.

in any kind of relationship, are either contingently permissible or contingently condemnable based on the attitude taken in sex. For instance, the Sex Wars have often focused on sadomasochist relationships and whether or not they are permissible or condemnable. Rather than making universal claims about the nature of the relationship, or acts animated in said relationship, or analyzing if the acts can be freely consented to, my position is that it can be either permissible or condemnable depending upon the playfulness of the participants. In this way, my view is not a moderate view, or middle ground view, but an alternate view of liberated sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

I will now argue that having an attitude of playfulness, as described by Maria Lugones, towards sex can allow for exploration and freedom in sexual expression without reproducing the oppressive norms of sexuality currently constructed. I do not contend that playfulness is the only attitude that can accomplish this goal, only that it does. There may be other attitudes towards sex that can achieve this and other admirable goals, but my focus will be on playfulness' ability to counter oppressive sexual norms.

An attitude of playfulness is characterized by Lugones as having no rules, but being intentional, any rules that do exist are not sacred, an uncertainty that is open to surprise, lacking self-importance, open to self-construction, unworried with

---

<sup>5</sup> It was my initial impulse to create a middle ground theory. However, after you (Shelley Wilcox) encouraged me to seek out more sources and decide if I was creating a middle ground theory I found that Gayle Rubin (1975-1986) outlines considerations for an moderate or middle view theory. I realized that reframing the debate with a focus on attitude was creating an alternate theory of liberation, not a middle ground.

competence, not wedded to a particular way of doing things, creative, not passive, and open to playing the fool. Upon first reading her description it was difficult for me to imagine an adult activity other than sex that could embody all of the qualities.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary sexologists<sup>7</sup> prescribe an approach to sex that has many of these qualities, even if not all call this attitude playfulness.

To change the norms of sexuality, the current norms must be deconstructed. MacKinnon claims that any attempt to experience female sexuality cannot be lived or spoken or felt or somatically sensed apart from its enforced definition. However, Lugones argues that playfulness deconstructs, and even abandons current constructions of, who we are and allows for reconstruction from an attitude that finds wisdom and delight in ambiguity and double edges. To identify how playfulness leads to the possibility of reconstruction of sexuality we need a working idea of what the current construction of sex is. In its currently constructed oppressive state, sex minimally requires either penetration or orgasm.<sup>8</sup> Sexologists and sex therapists<sup>9</sup> insist that maintaining this requirement for sex is detrimental to having good sex.

When penetration and orgasm are no longer held as sacred and essential parts of

---

<sup>6</sup> This may prove to be problematic to Lugones' theory of world-travelling as a method for achieving solidarity. Sex appears to fulfill her criteria for playful interactions with another who is distinct from oneself, yet sex may or may not provide the substantive experience that allows for solidarity in fighting oppression. I do not prepose whether or not this is the actual case, but that qualifications to her theory may be needed if this is the case. Or, this could be framed as a very enjoyable consequence to the praxis of feminist solidarity.

<sup>7</sup> Many of whom also identify as sex positive feminists such as Carol Queen

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that BDSM relationships stand in contrast to this construction, but this does not make them immediately playful, they are only playful insofar that they are not also wedded to performing sex in that particular fashion. I will discuss this issue briefly later in the paper.

<sup>9</sup> CURRENTLY RELYING ON HEARSAY; FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDED

sex, sex can become any number of expressions. Sex loses its focus on the competence and strength of erection, penetration, and achievement of orgasm. This makes sex ambiguous. Ambiguity does not claim that penetration or orgasm ought to be expelled from sexuality, but that sexuality ought not be ruled by them. For the unplayful, the loss of old constructs creates fear in not knowing who one is or what rules guide them, but the playful delight in it and find wisdom in it.

Lugones describes a two-imaged self as a part of a playful attitude that can allow for previously problematic animations to be included as a part of the reconstructed self. This ability comes from the players coming together in the ambiguity with an openness to playing the fool. Lugones claims that the fool has power in their unique ability to animate caricatures of themselves while acting sincerely in their reconstructed selves, simultaneously occupying both constructed and reconstructed worlds as a two-imaged self. When animating a two-imaged self the player becomes a trickster, a fool, one that is free in a way that those playing by the rules are not. The foolery of the two-imaged self allows heterosexual women and lesbians to play caricatures of themselves as soft and penetrable without being defined as such. Men and women can experience being penetrated by their partner(s) without taking on the identity of object because they can be the two-imaged subject and fucked simultaneously. The players create who they are rather than being constructed by norms.

Radical feminists may argue that there is a false-consciousness to the two-  
imaged self. The animation of their caricature is not a playful reenactment of  
expected roles, but an embodiment of and reification of oppressive sexual norms.  
Even if the deconstruction of old norms is real, to reenact them makes them real  
again as MacKinnon quotes a coerced pornography model, "You do it, you do it, and  
you do it; then you become it." However, this objection assumes that there is a an "it."  
A playful attitude rejects the sacredness of rules that creates a rigid idea of sex that  
can be characterized by "it." This is why I believe attitude is more important than  
relationship, structure, or sexual acts. Imagine a sexual relationship that mandates the  
woman be spanked or her feet be idolized for sex to be enjoyed or even count as sex.  
This rigid attitude towards sex allows for the reification of violence, objectification,  
and reduction to body parts as being what sexuality is. Even if there is mutual  
consent, it would be problematic. It is not something in the nature of BDSM or  
heterosexual relationships that recreate oppressive sexual norms, but that they are  
wedded to a specific way of performing sex that reifies the norms. However, if there  
is nothing that sex mandates, then sexuality becomes open to the infinite possibilities  
of existing within the ambiguity. There is no, "you do it, you do it, you do it; then you  
become it," because there is no "it." Sex becomes an ambiguous act that is whatever  
the players can create. Playful sexuality is always embodied by playful uncertainty  
that avoids the reification of problematic and oppressive sexual norms.

I think the best analogy for the playful uncertainty in sex is Calvinball. In Calvin & Hobbes the young boy and his stuffed tiger play a game that has no set rules, but rules are added and taken away by the players as the game unfolds. Each player is free to change the rules and how they act at anytime. As a result, no game of Calvinball is ever the same, and there is no way to tell who won so it isn't competitive, it is merely about the act and enjoyment of playing. In this way, playful sexuality is open to the infinite possibilities of each sexual experience, some more pleasurable than others, but never the same.

A pragmatic concern needs to be addressed because it is difficult to be creative in sex when we are not exposed to anyone else's sexuality but our own and that shown in mainstream pornography. I believe that a practice of consciousness raising of individual's sexual experiences can aid in greater sexual creativity. Imagine the opposite of being bombarded with pornography that repeatedly shows just a few sexual acts to be mimicked (acts that also reenact the oppressive norms). Having diverse people from a variety of relationships share honestly about their own desires and practices breaks down any notion that the established sexual norms are somehow natural and opens the possibility of individuals reconstructing who they are through ambiguous, creative, playful sex. The consciousness raising of experiences could take the form of group meetings or through some kind of erotica, but it would

look vastly different from the current paradigm of pornography, Penthouse letters, dishonesty, or silence about one's sexual practices.

In conclusion, I have argued that the attitude in sex takes primacy in addressing sexual oppression over types of relationships, sex acts, and consent. I then adapted Lugones' account of playfulness and applied it to sex, arguing that a playful attitude towards sex can be liberating by deconstructing the oppressive sexual norms and reconstructing a new sexuality from ambiguity.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Cohen, Cheryl H (1986). "The Feminist Sexuality Debate: Ethics and Politics." *Hypatia* 1(2) (1986): 71-86.
2. Ferguson, Ann (1984). "Sex war: The debate between radical and libertarian feminists." *Signs: A Journal of Women and Culture*: 106-112.
3. Lugones, María (1987). "Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2 (2):3 - 19.
4. MacKinnon, Catherine (1982). "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda from Theory." *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Feminist Theory, (Spring, 1982), pp. 515-544
5. Mohanty, Chandra (2002). "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (2002), vol. 28, no. 2
6. Rubin, Gayle (1989). "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carole S. Vance.