

*Content Note: This article discusses topics of abortion. While the purpose of this article is to reclaim abortion from notions of it being an inherently traumatic or taboo experience, the author honours and recognizes a myriad of heavy emotions that may arise through discussions of this topic. If it is not within your capacity to engage with this article at this time, the author extends a wholehearted invitation to prioritize your mental wellbeing and to withhold from reading the article.*

### **Abortion Humour: It's Not That Serious**

Abortion is often understood as a traumatic experience. This constructed notion is perpetuated through various cultural institutions, such as Crisis Pregnancy Centres. In fact, the Okanagan Valley Pregnancy Care Centre (OVPCC), states that “[they] empower women by affirming life. [they] affirm life by empowering women” (OVPCC). This non-profit, faith-based organization offers counseling for people experiencing unplanned pregnancies to “explore all options” surrounding adoption, parenting as well as abortion, including “post-abortion care for patients experiencing distress” (OVPCC). OVPCC states that post-abortion symptoms may occur long after the procedure, even impacting men, and while there may be immediate relief, women may experience regret (OVPCC).

According to the American Medical Association, “crisis pregnancy centers ... are organizations that seek to intercept women with unintended pregnancies who might be considering abortion. Their mission is to prevent abortions by persuading women that adoption or parenting is a better option” (Bryant and Swartz). Despite appearing like legitimate medical clinics, crisis pregnancy centres will go as far as to link the post-abortion period to the subsequent experience of serious mental health disorders, even though this relationship has been debunked by multiple scientific research studies (Bryant and Swartz; Kelly 20).

In fact, Post-Abortion Syndrome (PAS), sometimes known as Post-Abortion Stress Syndrome (PSS), posits that women\* who undergo abortion will subsequently experience symptoms similar to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)<sup>1</sup> (Kelly 20). In addition to the echoing of PTSD, proponents of PAS also describe symptoms such as,

avoidance of any person or event associated with the abortion; inability to establish or maintain relationships with men; development of eating disorders in a subconscious attempt to appear unattractive to the opposite sex thus avoiding sexual intimacy and pregnancy; an obsession with becoming pregnant again with a “replacement” or “atonement” baby; inability to bond with one’s present or future children; sexual dysfunction, including promiscuity or a loss of interest in sex; overly intense involvement with either pro-life or pro-choice activism; and/or anniversary syndrome, an increase in symptoms coinciding with the date of the abortion or projected due date for a birth. (Kelly 20)

The gendered medicalization of PAS, especially regarding its assumptions of motherhood as a natural and innately desired life process, solidifies abortion as an unnatural, harmful and traumatic procedure. This medicalization of the post-abortion period reflects the social control that the dominant culture’s abortion stigma weaponizes through its perpetuation of traditional gender norms to ultimately dissuade women\* from accessing their reproductive rights.

What does it mean then, to laugh at something the dominant culture has cemented as traumatic, serious and taboo? I was inspired to explore reparative abortion humour after

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<sup>1</sup> The asterisk on the term women\* represents anyone who has the potential to get an abortion. While this inclusivity is largely not reflected in data gathered from secondary sources, I wish to be inclusive in my discussion of abortion stigma and recognize that reproductive justice extends beyond cisnormativity.

organizing a local protest in response to the overturning of Roe v. Wade. The protest was emotionally heavy at times, with attendees sharing harrowing experiences of being denied reproductive care. We marched collectively in deep fear and anger to show our solidarity with those who have lost their reproductive rights in the United States. We also raised awareness of Canada's abortion accessibility issues, especially for those living in rural communities.

But simultaneously, I noticed a large presence of humour at the event too. As anti-abortion proponents met us with the same sputtering solemnity in the likes of "Mommy, don't kill me" signage, most pro-abortion attendees paid no notice— instead laughing and finding joy as a collective of feminists. We cultivated humour in the presence of assumed formality, shame and desperate contrite. None of us were sorry about standing up for abortion. And this fearlessness and lack of shame was most intensely displayed in the comedic signage carried by fellow pro-abortion protest attendees.

Some of the signage read as follows:

"Hands off my coochie"

"Not every ejaculation needs a last name"

"An abortion could have saved Zoey 101" (this was my sign).

"Babies are stupid noobs, choose abortion"

"Paws off" (this was displayed on the vest of a protest attendee's puppy).

"Legislate your dick" (this sign was flaunted by a badass elderly woman).

The humour in these slogans is the exact opposite of the hushed tone of voice that so often accompanies any mention of abortion. These slogans were flippant, unapologetic, and blunt. They contradicted the lasting, sticky legacy of PAS. Abortion is not inherently traumatic or serious. It can be an easy decision. It can be made light of. It can be funny. In fact, according to

Major et al., “Two years postabortion, 301 (72%) of 418 women were satisfied with their decision; 306 (69%) of 441 said they would have the abortion again; 315 (72%) of 440 reported more benefit than harm from their abortion; and 308 (80%) of 386 were not depressed” (777). This data directly contradicts the understanding of abortion as necessarily traumatic. It is not necessarily a traumatic life event, and the hilarity that this topic was met with during the protest further unravels these claims of trauma. This humour cackles in the face of the dominant culture’s weaponization of medical rhetoric. It breathes laughter into the taboo. It serves as a blunt punchline in response to the dominant culture’s attempt to bar access to abortion. In doing so, it makes abortion that much more accessible, that much more normalized and accepted within our collective cultural consciousness. And that is powerful.



*(Laughter At Our Protest* courtesy of Amethyst Skye, protest attendee)

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