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Familiar: An Artistic Exploration of Feminism Through Comedy

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Mesa Story Melton

Familiar:

An artistic exploration of feminism through comedy

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Abstract

This project seeks to examine feminism through the widely accessible means of comedic performance. I have written, created, and acted in a web series that I established for several reasons: namely, to diffuse information about the oppressions that female-identifying individuals face in their everyday life as well as in the larger scheme of existence, but also to attempt to create a community of intersectional communication and collaboration where women can go to express their grievances and inspirations as well as seek comfort for the issues that plague them by nature of their gender identification. The show, *Femiliar*, is a sketch comedy web series consisting of one-minute episodes, released weekly, that satirize problematic ideologies pervasive throughout modern society. I have been able to garner hundreds of views on the various videos I have released and hope to continue to inspire a change of thought in people who are not affected directly by these issues, and to foster a sense of hope for those who are. I have addressed common issues such as catcalling and pop culture's portrayal of women, but also less-recognized problems like oppressive female clothing and the perceived ownership of women by their spouses and fathers.

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Introduction

As Anna Fields notes in her text on females in the professional field of comedy, “‘lady doctor,’ ‘female reporter,’ ‘woman writer,’ and others terms commonly used to refer to all non-male professionals during and immediately after World War II” (Fields p. 74/75) are no longer widely accepted terms as they were a mere seventy years ago, and as the years go by, more and more fields traditionally dominated by men are being equalized by women. The taboo of women in the workforce—as opposed to being resigned, with limited choices, to a life in the home—has all but dissolved entirely. Though Fields notes that women in professions such as medicine are slowly losing their distinction as a *woman* in their disciplines and are earning equal treatment to that of men who share those occupations, there are leagues to conquer before women are seen equally in all professional domains. Fields focuses specifically on the business of comedy, and notes that women are still labeled as *female* comedians performing *women’s* comedy.

History of Women in Comedy

It has been an uphill battle for women in comedy ever since Jackie “Moms” Mabley first began paving the way for female comedians in the early 1900s. Though Phyllis Diller is widely regarded as the pioneer for females in stand-up, Moms Mabley burst onto the scene about thirty years earlier than Diller. Mabley faced the double-layered challenge of overcoming both her gender and race in order to win over audiences, yet she did so quite effectively and managed to publicly discuss hot political and social issues without alienating her fans. (She was especially revolutionary in that she was a black, female, *and* gay comedian.) Mabley straddled the worlds of “female comedy” and “black comedy,” both considered separate from the mainstream and both born out of the different

experiences born out of systematic oppression. She is the quintessential example of using humor to survive persecution as well as personal suffering, and her demeanor was so welcoming and light-hearted (she often portrayed a woman much older than herself and would speak as if missing her dentures) that she was able to perform controversial material that was highly sexual and racially charged largely without backlash. Sadly, despite her “hard-won status as a seminal rule-breaker whose efforts helped both Civil Rights and Feminist activists achieve their common goals,” Mabley’s name remains known by few to this day, “demonstrating how underappreciated the contributions of comedienne-ballerinas of color remain” (Fields, Anna, Kindle location 2087-2088, 2110).

In the 1950s, Phyllis Diller took to the stage, marking the start of a wave of female comedians through the remainder of the century. With her rapid-fire stand-up routines and fearless domination of the stage, she publicly proved that women could be funny without men by their sides, performing original material alone on stage. Though not the first female stand-up comic- that title is held by Mabley-, it is she who is credited for breaking the mold of what role women could play in the comedic field. At the time there was a specific formula that women had to work within to perform comedy, and it frequently entailed singing and dancing in some sort of figure-framing attire. Female performers at the time could be singer/dancer-comediennes or comedic actors—as exemplified by Lucille Ball—but never just comics.

Diller didn’t launch her career on the vaudeville stage, as was common at the time for rising comedians, but rather continued in Mabley’s footsteps by performing initially in the back rooms of clubs and gay bars around New York City. Even when presented with the opportunity to perform three shows at the renowned Copacabana Nightclub, seen

at the time as an induction into the big leagues, she dropped out after the first show because she wasn't interested in performing for audiences that were looking for the stereotypical female performer to walk onstage and, literally, dance for them.

But though she represents the first significant step for women in comedy, she was not able to break the mold entirely, and still played into damaging ideas about female self-esteem by utilizing self-deprecation in her humor as a way to make herself less threatening to the audience. She defended this tactic, saying that “to refer to oneself in a negative way is always a good way to say hello to an audience. So right away, you come out and kiss ass.” (Kohen, Yael, *Kindle* locations 561–564). She wore baggy clothing or funny costumes in order to cover up her striking figure because she believed that the audience would not pay attention to her jokes if her beauty distracted them, and there was certainly justification for this point of view.

Then came Elaine May, who proved that self-esteem, beauty, and comedic appeal were not mutually exclusive traits. An outline for “stock characters” that is still relevant to this day prescribes that there is typically a leading character who is attractive and a best friend who is funny; May proved that she could be both. She was viewed as both hysterically funny and a genuine beauty by her audiences, and did not attempt to make herself less desirable in order to coerce the audience to focus on her talent in the way that Diller did. However, it should be noted that May's success would likely have not been possible without Diller's initial step toward legitimizing female comics. May differed fundamentally from Diller in that her routines, primarily performed alongside acting partner Mike Nichols, were based around characters and situations, as opposed to focusing on the more classic stand-up formula of setup and punch line. For this reason

she is seen as the mother of sketch comedy, while Mabley and Diller are the prototypical female stand-ups.

With the emergence of each new female comic after these, the arduous process of validating women's place in the world of comedy continued. It is especially important to realize that the role these women played in history contributed to shaping public consciousness about gender experience. These were the times before technology made the diffusion of information easy; the general public then experienced significantly less exposure to the diversity of experience we can view with the click of a mouse today. Gender roles were clearly defined, and these women were not only breaking out of those roles in their choice of career but were also furthering feminism, perhaps unknowingly, by informing their audiences about the female experience in a way that had never been done before. Comedy writer Gene Perret notes that "A man does certain things and complains about certain things; a woman does other things and has her own complaints. But [at the time] we'd never heard them before." (Kohen, Yael, Kindle locations 538–539) The entertainment industry at the time focused almost entirely on the perspective of men, meaning that even the slightest shift toward a female gaze was significant.

Lily Tomlin was a prominent figure in broadcasting the female experience through comedy and in helping normalize previously taboo subjects regarding women. Tomlin came to the spotlight in the 1960s when political turmoil and social upheaval was rampant throughout the United States. Unlike Joan Rivers, who began her journey through comedic history just before this time, Tomlin "embraced the ethos of 1960s counterculture" and, due in part to her social consciousness, she became one of the most revolutionary performers of her time. She was reminiscent of Elaine May in that she

focused on character above punch line, but the material she performed was something of her own making. She capitalized on the sexual revolution of the time that was shifting gender norms and even addressed such previously untouched topics as vibrators and female orgasm.

Simone de Beauvoir begins her book *The Second Sex* by describing women's status as the "other" in relationship to men, who mark the central point from which all is derived. "Man defines woman, not in herself, but in relationship to himself... she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (Beauvoir, pp. 5–6) In this same manner, funny women, the "other," are deemed as mere exceptions to the rule that women are inherently unfunny.

This is perhaps why it is continually so difficult for women to break the mold and finally answer the longstanding question posed in *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*—"Are women funny?" All evidence that points toward "Yes!" is significantly devalued by being labeled as an anomaly, and thus female progress toward proving themselves in comedy has been grueling. Merrill Markoe, writer and co-creator of *Late Night with David Letterman*, summed up this inequality in an interview: "I kept thinking to myself, Why was she [May] not as big a comedic actor as, say Will Ferrell or Adam Sandler?... The unfortunate answer is that women just don't get as far being hilarious as men do. Period." (Kohen, Yael, Kindle locations 784–786).

The Political and Social Progression of Comedy

Humor has been used throughout history as a means of both coping with tragedy and oppression and inciting political and social change. "Survivalist humor," a term coined by Elsie Williams in her study *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American*

Comedic Tradition, is used to describe the type of humor employed by slaves on plantations in order to cope with their deplorable circumstances, and the “Plantation Survivalist” is considered one of four distinct characters that have shaped the history of black comedy. Survivalist humor “was developed as a mechanism to deal emotionally and psychologically with the effects of slavery and used as satire against the injustices and dehumanization” of the slaves. (Fields, Anna. *The Girl in the Show*, Kindle locations 2130–2131). Following the Plantation Survivalist are the Accommodationist, the in-group Satirist, and, finally, the Integrationist—arguably the most progressive and influential character, because it addresses controversial topics in front of a gender- and race-integrated audience. The TV show *The Jeffersons*, which utilized integrationist humor, was well received by its diverse live audience and is a prime example of how comedy can be used to incite change by normalizing the discussion of controversial topics.

Humor has long been useful as a nonviolent form of rebellion in which the oppressed can speak out in a way that is viewed as less threatening than other popular ways of expressing discontent. Unlike protests or violent action, comedy provides a safety net for the activist who utilizes it, and the female comics who emerged in the twentieth century, from Mabley to Diller to May to Tomlin, demonstrate the value of this principle. Comedy has also proven to be an important way of coping with personal tragedy, as can be seen clearly when most comedians’ routines are analyzed thoroughly. This is not a new idea—Phyllis Diller coped with the traumas in her life, specifically those regarding her dark past with men, through the jokes in her stand-up. She even constructed a fictitious husband named Fang who weathered all the blows she doled out

to men throughout her performances. Iconic stand-up comic and actor Tig Notaro is the prime example of this- she first garnered public attention for her legendary routine about her cancer diagnosis, which she performed because she was feeling low and felt that she had nothing to lose but which ironically launched her into stardom. She later created the TV series *One Mississippi*-based on the year of her life when sequentially she lost her mother, contracted a life-threatening digestive tract disease, and went through a breakup- through which she used comedy as a means to explore her trauma. This is not an unusual approach- Notaro is in good company among Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes, and Mindy Kaling, to name a few.

Authors have even written books such as *Exit Laughing: How Humor Takes the Sting Out of Death* to help readers digest the unavoidable difficulties that life presents to all of us. Comedy approaches tragedy from an angle that aims to take the sting out of difficult situations; and that, along with the power it holds to subtly incite social change, is what drew me to it as a channel through which to explore and promote feminist values. I wanted to find a way to present this topic through a lens that made it palatable for a wider audience, rather than to alienate dissenting opinions as null and void. Presenting the feminist point of view through comedy is valuable because feminism is unavoidably controversial and too often associated with irrational and extremist perspectives of gender. Roxanne Gay notes in her exploration of herself as an imperfect feminist that “an angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person [is the]... caricature... [of] how feminists have been warped by the people who fear feminism most.” (Gay, Kindle location 86) Following in the footsteps of the women described above, I sought to

intelligently yet poignantly contribute to the advancement of women in society by portraying the ins and outs of the female experience.

Creative Project Description

I have personally witnessed the ridicule of anti-feminists who believe the movement to be flawed beyond deserving recognition and who therefore have never become acquainted with the core values underpinning feminism. De Beauvoir herself, avid and early feminist though she was, noted that feminism can cause such a polarizing effect that its arguments for equality are lost among the quarrels it sparks. Recognizing this truth, I sought to approach the feminist debate in an accessible, relatable way that would promote individual thought in the areas I was exploring rather than present absolute truths for people to either swallow whole or reject entirely.

Keeping in mind that comedy serves as a useful tool in mitigating contentious or serious issues, I conceived the idea for a comedic series, relatable to females and thought-provoking to other gender identities, that would present different aspects of the female experience in each episode: *Femiliar*. The name means to convey concisely that the show is about females and feminism and presents concepts that are familiar to most people who identify as women.

For example, Episode 6 of *Femiliar* addresses the problem of women being written off as insane or hysterical if they present the slightest reason to categorize them as such. In the episode, one woman is thrown into an unknown space and learns through a dirt-covered and hardened woman she meets there that she is now a resident of Shut-Her-Up Island, a purgatory-like world to which women are sent if a man deems them crazy. The various other prisoners there tell their own harrowing stories of why they were

sentenced to live their lives out on the Island, though all of them simply prove how little a woman has to do to have her perspective delegitimized because she is “crazy.” This episode addresses how easy it is to denounce the perspective of a woman and how problematic the colloquial turn of phrase “she’s crazy” actually is in the pursuit of gender equality.

In working on this project, one of the most important ideals to adhere to was the collaborative aspect I wanted to incorporate in my project, and this was accomplished by building a trusted team with whom to pursue the project. The co-creator of *Femiliar*, fellow honors student Kaylee Simonson, came aboard early on and helped to shape the path that the web series took in each episode. At the outset, we decided how essential it was to use *Femiliar* as a means of fostering a safe and uplifting environment for women to share their ideas and grievances so that we could in turn share those with the larger public viewing our videos.

As mentioned previously, there was a time when male understanding was the *only* understanding being addressed in comedic material, and I wanted to follow in the footsteps of Diller and Tomlin in representing a female perspective that could provide relief to other women who have the same experiences do not see them widely publicized. Though a stronger community of women certainly exists in modern times more than in recent history, the journey that women throughout time have undergone is inherently different from that of other notoriously oppressed groups in that, for women, there is no “before” oppression. That is to say, there is no period in time that women can seek to return to where her mistreatment did not exist. For other groups, ones that have typically been subject to more acute persecution throughout recent history, there was a starting

point for their maltreatment and the group as a whole could fathom a time before that abuse began to occur.

As Beauvoir so articulately explains in her writings, women have no such period in time that they can seek to return to, and they lack a specified location in which it feels safe to gather as a community. Instead, “they live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests, and social conditions to certain men—fathers or husbands—more closely than to other women.” (Beauvoir, p. 8) Women must create a community of our own, carve it out from the male-dominated world we have never lived without, and that cannot happen without focused, conscientious effort on the part of females.

I wanted to keep that information at the forefront of my mind as I pursued this project, so that I could keep my focus balanced between inciting change and contributing to the budding community ties between women. I was diligent about asking for input from the people around me and encouraging a dialogue among anyone who came in contact with the videos we released. My closest tie was made, of course, with Kaylee, who provided invaluable input to the project every week and has been featured in each episode. We constantly shared ideas and kept one another in line with the ideology we originally laid out, most of which has been outlined above.

In addition, I reached out as much as possible to students at my school as well those from my hometown in the South in order to widen my perspective on the issues I was tackling, and with the ultimate goal of intersectional representation in mind. I remain aware that my representation of female oppression and feminist ideals is limited to my own experiences and that research into differing female experiences is continually paramount. I have episodes in the works that seek to explore a wider perspective and

represent a broader cross-section of female life (experiences particular to women of color in the States, for example), but I wish to note that the issues my project addresses represent only a sliver of the global picture.

As can be seen through the evolution of the *Femiliar* videos released to date, I began this process from a simpler standpoint and strove to get across in a straightforward way the issues I was exploring with my team, who, besides Kaylee, included Leon Hinata as Camera Operator/Cinematographer, Josh Dixon as Editor/Producer, and Kelsey Leland and Jacqueline Meissner as Production Assistants/Peer Advisors. Throughout this undertaking, however (and as “I” morphed increasingly into “we”), we began to fine-tune the comedic approaches used in the episodes and discovered organically that the most fitting comedic route to take for *Femiliar* was that of satire.

Satire is a form of comedy that typically utilizes irony, wit, and exaggeration to criticize ideas in a humorous way and that seeks to provoke thought in the audience. It has the unique power of subtly causing a reconsideration of one’s personally held, even subconscious, beliefs; and this is precisely what I hoped to achieve with *Femiliar*. In validation of this choice for framing our message, our best-received videos to date have been those utilizing satirical tools in particular, and our subsequent videos will continue to follow suit.

Conclusion

I entered into this project conscious of the need to remain level-headed, as I was aware that *Femiliar* would be available through the extremely public platform of social media. I wanted to avoid being affected by either judgment or praise and was mindful to accept only constructive scrutiny that was useful in advancing the creative techniques I was

using to convey the ideology under my project. Though the nature of my project is artistic, the ultimate goal is one of social activism and does not hinge on the opinions of the audience but rather on the deeper effect it has on them. This effect is difficult, if not impossible, to measure accurately; and social progress often moves at such a pace that it can be nearly impossible to see as it inches forward. Nonetheless, each diligent endeavor contributes to the collective growth of these movements and thus progress is made. I cannot assert with any scientific certainty that my undertakings have had the desired effect, I cannot do more than report the individual feedback that I have received, but in joining the ranks of those who seek to make a difference I have learned of the inherent value of the effort itself.

Comedy reaches the masses and has the unique ability to unify diverse groups of people through its light-hearted approach to difficult realities. The progression of women through the comedic field mirrors that of women in general through society, and it is partially through performing arts that women have solidified their voice in this country. Women initially took the stage and offered inspiration to other females who previously had little to no opportunity to hear their own experiences publicized, and since then both society and the comedy world have grown towards erasing the inequality between genders. Some of the most well known comedic figures in modern times are women, with Ellen DeGeneres acting as the quintessential example of this. She is unique in that she consciously chose to address non-gender-specific topics when starting her career, and in that way she has been a modern pioneer for eliminating the gender gap. While it still exists, however, it is important to shed light on the oppressions that women face to this day in an attempt to eliminate them and further the movement towards equalize the

playing field across all gender identities Feminism as a movement takes equality as its core belief; it is founded upon the desire for inclusion, and modern feminists such as myself must seek to adhere to this central value at all times. As times change, so do the methods through which we can seek change. Art, whether digital or live, is only one of these. But when created with clear intention, art will make a difference.

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