

# FREE FEMINISM TOMORROW

RYAN MILLER

For \$30 plus tax and shipping, you can be the owner of a 100% cotton, made-in-America t-shirt inscribed in sharp, upper-case font with the four words: “The Future is Female” (“The Future”). Sold since 2015 by the bi-coastal boutique, Otherwild, the shirt and slogan have taken off in popularity and can now be found on coffee mugs and the backs of celebrities as they leave high-end hotels (Meltzer). Even a recent Saturday Night Live sketch referenced the shirt when a guy wore it to demonstrate his feminist cred—that is, in the hopes of impressing a woman he wanted to sleep with (“Girl”). Otherwild writes, “The Future is Female is the past, the present and the future, and is language that resonates” (“The Future”). The popularity of the shirt can attest to the slogan’s resonance and presentness particularly in the age of social media where the hashtag #thefutureisfemale has received countless likes to date. It is also fair to say that “The Future is Female” is the future, given the ability for someone to read the statement literally. This reference to “the past” on the other hand may seem slightly more out of place, but it is likely an acknowledgment of the shirt’s origin: it was designed in 1972 for the opening of a women’s bookstore and later popularized from a 1975 image taken by the photographer Liza Cowan (“The Future”).

As the shirt becomes ubiquitous with the women’s movement, there is some irony to the recent triumph of the “The Future is Female.” For just like the kitschy framed signs at the bar that proudly announce “FREE BEER TOMORROW” with the inherent assumption that there is no free beer *today*, there is also the assumption that today is not “female.” If the shirt has been around for over forty years and we are still having to wear “The Future is Female” as a bumper sticker mantra on our chest, has anything really changed? Furthermore, as we wear the shirt or proudly type the hashtag into our Instagram captions are we convincing ourselves we are changing anything? I would argue that the reasons the shirt resonates with so many are the same reasons why “The Future is Female” shirt is an ineffective medium for change.

For the sake of clarity moving forward, I propose some modest explanation of what it means for a time to be or not be “female,” a nebulous concept with no universal definition. Consider that every society in the world today is a patriarchy, predominantly ruled by men (Cohen). Narrowing in on the United States, women who make up half the population and over half of the work force are “substantially behind men when it comes to their representation in leadership positions,” according to the Center for American Progress, which cites industries like financial services, in which women “make up 54 percent of the labor force . . . 29 percent of executive and senior level managers and 2 percent of CEOs,” and academia where “only 31 percent of full professors and 27 percent of college presidents” are women (Warner and Corley 1).

Under this leadership, women in the U.S. get paid less than their male counterparts for equal work, lack access to necessary and affordable health care, and have a one-in-three chance of being sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Burke; “Violence Prevention”). Therefore, for a time to be female I suggest, is a time in which women make up an equal or greater share of the power structure in society in order to secure the same rights and opportunities that men possess for a safe and prosperous future.

With this ideal in mind and going back to the shirt, humanities scholar Wendy Doniger’s essay, “Many Masks, Many Selves”—which analyzes the voluntary and involuntary identities, or “masks,” that people inhabit—provides a lens for understanding why the shirt is appealing but possibly unproductive. While many agree that “The Future is Female” is a collective movement, Doniger’s essay, an exploration of and challenge to commonly held beliefs about the authenticity of individual identity, gives context for how the motivations of the individual who purchases the shirt interact within the movement. Doniger writes,

We need an audience to play out the self and a mask to give us that refreshed, vivid sense of self that is inspired by actively playing a role. . . . Moreover, we project what we regard as our best self to the world.” She labels this “upward hypocrisy,” but qualifies that it “can be a very good thing. (67)

Doniger is saying that we represent ourselves in relation to others, and we choose that representation based on what we think is the best way to be represented. If we didn’t have an audience, whether it be the people in public who see us wearing the shirt or our followers on social media who see the photographic, hashtag-accompanied evidence of us wearing the shirt, there would be no need to wear it in the first place. To wear, and therefore project, a belief to the world does not inherently mean we do not hold these beliefs when we are alone; rather, as Doniger argues, the audience necessitates the *expression* of those beliefs as part of the expression of ourselves and our identity. Under this framework we are projecting “what we regard as our best self.” Maybe a shirt or hashtag is not as subtle as a metaphorical mask, but by displaying the message—an easy read for its simplicity—as part of our identity we allow the message to be seen and to connect us to a larger audience, even a movement.

This connective playing-out of the self through the projection of “The Future is Female” is, of course, a performance of our feminist selves: a performance that may be a sincere public expression of our private selves but on a deeper level contains a different kind of deception. Doniger writes, “We assume that masquerades lie, and they often do, at least on the surface. But masquerading as ourselves often reaffirms an enduring network of selves inside us”—implying that despite the possibility for the identities we project, that is, the “masquerades,” to seem disingenuous, the projection can also work both ways. As we put out the belief that the future is female to others, we can become internally more certain and more affirmed of its prophecy and

ourselves as its feminist predictors (67). I am not questioning that those who wear “The Future is Female” on their shirts are not genuine in their beliefs. However, in the act of wearing and declaring “The Future is Female,” there may be the belief by its advocates that by doing so we are more formidable in the quest for gender equality. The overlooked distinction is that while Doniger’s “masquerades” are rooted in “actively playing a role”—exemplified in her essay by references to President Reagan speaking passionately to European leaders who were actually WWII veterans, as if he too had fought in Europe during the war (though likely drawing from memories of his acting days), or the Chevalier/Chelvalière d’Eon portraying himself as a woman portraying herself as a man (61, 64)—the shirt, by contrast, is merely a tool for visual representation, not the actively played role itself. If we want to give the impression that we are fit, we may spend hours at the gym, eat healthy foods, and wear clothes with messages like “Stop Wishing, Start Lifting,” all while posting pictures on Instagram of the aforementioned activities. Alternatively, we can pour ourselves into a pair of Spanx, instantly making our thighs and tummies appear smaller. Both cases might demonstrate “upward hypocrisy” toward a trim figure yet only the former actually (and literally) strengthens the chosen identity of someone in good shape. Yet we continue to wear the same shirt as generations prior, while at the same time fewer women are being elected to government (Cohn). Thus, the question persists: is the “enduring network of selves” within the many individuals who buy and wear the shirt reaffirmed enough to push forward and realize a future that is truly female? Or, is the shirt the feminist equivalent of Spanx?

While pondering the question of gender-equity shapewear, the deficiencies of “The Future is Female” shirt are also illuminated by writer Zadie Smith with the help of her essay “Speaking in Tongues,” which considers, among other things, the varying degrees of identity and ideology a public will tolerate from its artists and politicians. Artists such as Shakespeare, she writes, are given the ability to never be pinned down “to a single identity,” referencing the Keats’ term “negative capability” defined as “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Smith). The benefit for one who is able to engage in negative capability, according to Smith, is that he or she is able to “speak truth plurally” by way of being “a mass of contradictory, irresolvable voices.” In other words, artists are given the reins to speak “simultaneous truths,” despite the possibility of contradiction, because they are not forced by their audience into the strict confines of “singular certainty,” the commitment to a principal, unequivocal identity or belief. For politicians, Smith puts forth the antithesis to negative capability, using what Stephen Greenblatt calls “ideological heroism—the fierce, self-immolating embrace of an idea or institution” (Smith). Politicians must be unwavering in their beliefs or risk being “insufficiently committed to an ideology,” and the more committed they are, Smith argues, the stronger people believe the politician to be. As she stakes these two opposing poles of “negative capability” and “ideological heroism,” “The Future is

Female” shirt resides between the two in a seemingly tempting yet impotent middle ground. On the one hand, “The Future is Female” contains traces of negative capability, found first in the irresolvable “The *Future* is” and then again in the all-encompassing “Female.” The “Future,” an unprovable and undefined time, may give wearers of the shirt optimistic solace free from the limitations of today’s patriarchal reality, while the limitations of today’s patriarchal reality persist all the same. Similarly, the word “Female” may appear to be a succinct way to capture “a mass” of voices, and certainly “Female” encapsulates many identities: black women, white women, trans women, women who believe in traditional gender roles, women who advocate for the total separation of the sexes, just to name a few. Yet while many identities can feel included in this phrasing, the ambiguity of “Female” as an objective abstract both the shared and distinct aims of these varying identities into a mysterious monolith. Rather than allowing these uncertainties and ambiguities to speak truth plurally, “Female” in the “The Future is Female” plays them up for the sake of mass appeal to those varying identities, while hand-waving over what the actual goal of being female means.

On the other hand, and despite adopting aspects of negative capability, simultaneously there are also traits of “ideological heroism” employed in the methodology of the t-shirt (Smith). By purchasing and proudly wearing the shirt there is a sense of declaration. It is a commitment to the non-passive assertion that the future *is* female and gains traction precisely in the political realm where ideological heroism is desired (evidenced by the frequency with which the phrase was invoked in the presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton). Yet, again the phrase does not stand for any real policy goals or specified leaders. By existing in this duality, the phrase is not “insufficiently committed to an ideology,” but instead is sufficiently committed to an insufficient ideology.

But “Speaking in Tongues” elucidates more than just lame generalities that may neutralize the shirt and its intent. Rooted in the greater focus of her essay, that is, the communicative powers of Barack Obama, Smith provides another means for considering “The Future is Female.” When Smith writes about Obama’s “story of a genuinely many-voiced man,” she highlights his ability to transcend a “simple linear inheritance, of . . . dreams and aspirations passed down . . . and fulfilled.” She is saying that he did not experience a clean-cut transition of realized dreams between his parents and himself, and instead quotes Obama as saying he “*occupied the place* where [his parents] dreams had been.” To “*occupy* a dream,” Smith argues, is “to exist in a dreamed space” making the distinction that occupying “is surely a quite different thing from simply *inheriting*.” Smith alludes to this distinction earlier when she writes that Obama’s tale is “not the old tragedy of gaining a new, false voice” but rather “is all about addition.” To occupy requires “addition,” engagement, and consideration, whereas inheritance is merely passing along something from one owner to another. In many ways, the women’s movement, similar to Obama, is not the product of “simple linear

inheritance”; previous generations of women were not able to overcome disadvantage and simply pass on a life full of equal opportunity to their offspring (Smith). Consequently, without these realized dreams to inherit, the women’s movement today must instead “occupy” that dream space, and as occupiers there is the opportunity to engage and achieve that vision. Though, by wearing the exact same shirt with a still very much male present, the wearers of “The Future is Female” appear content to inherit those dreams solely to pass them down to the next generation, albeit still as dreams and not as reality. Once again, to wear the shirt is to optimistically hope for the future, while tacitly accepting that the future of yesterday is not today.

Yet, we don’t need to abandon the shirt entirely. Both Doniger and Smith’s essays offer guidance in unraveling the limitations of “The Future is Female.” By using Doniger’s “vivid sense of self that is inspired by actively playing a role,” we see that we can work more towards “actively playing a role” to establish and strengthen that “vivid sense of self.” This may mean that in addition to buying shirts, lighters, or coffee mugs imprinted with hopeful catchalls, we support businesses that pay and promote women equally. This may mean that when we wear the shirt we also volunteer for women’s rights organizations. This may mean we spend a little less time on social media and a little more time educating ourselves and others on the state of gender equality in our communities.

This does not mean we disregard the efforts and strides of those who came before us. As Smith attributes Obama’s success to his ability to embrace “complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives,” which she calls “our collective human messiness,” we should ask for ourselves: what, then, is the history of the shirt? In fact, the back story of “The “Future is Female” is that it came out of the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970’s—a movement that was feminist in its aims, but likely different from the broader aims of the women’s movement today (Meltzer). Yet if Obama achieved his goals, as Smith asserts, precisely because he welcomed and built on to all that came before him, despite complications or differences, the supporters of “The Future is Female” should too embrace and build on its particular past and welcome the fact that the calls for gender equality have never been from one unified voice but rather “multiple” and contradictory “narratives” that may not be so easily simplified into four words. Once we accept that the history of the women’s movement is not neat or simple, we can move on to learning, confronting, and evolving from those complexities. In the hopes of achieving our goals, we must now look to build onto the dreams of those before us.

So, before we continue being hypnotized by the message of that not-yet self-fulfilled prophecy longed for since the 1970’s, I propose we at least start by adding to that message. The Future is Female. The Future is Now.

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**RYAN MILLER '19GS** studies history with a specialization in gender and sexuality. She is a mentor with Read Ahead and a member of the Next Generation Council for Volunteers of America–Greater New York. Previously, she worked for Christie's Auction House. Originally from North Carolina, she has lived in Paris and Boston before making New York her home.