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“Feminist Card”: A Reclamation of Autonomy

On an ornately decorated 3.5” x 2” crème-colored notecard reads, “You have just insulted a woman.” The message is typed, but the letters are sprawled in a hybrid of print and cursive, and the text is encased by a delicate flower pattern. The Minnesota Historical Society, to which the artifact belongs, refers to the note as a “Feminist Sexual Harassment Card.” One side of the card reads, “SIR: Perhaps you are unaware that what you just did was insulting to me as a woman. Try to think of how you would feel if your daughter, wife, sister, or other relative or friend were treated in this way. Thank you for your attention.” Flipping the card over, the message finishes, “This card is chemically treated. In three days your prick will fall off.” Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, avid feminists would distribute these cards as a way of drawing attention to the second wave feminist movement and providing resistance to salacious male advances.¹ The “Feminist Sexual Harassment Card” embodies the second wave feminist movement’s agenda to reclaim female autonomy by opposing the construction of female passivity, transactional relationships, and a beholden mindset; the “Feminist Card” creates a new narrative of women fighting to secure the liberty to take control of their own sexual identities.

The “Feminist Card” operates as a response to the aggregation of mistreatment of women and provides opposition to the passive role to which women were assigned. Simply by confronting a man’s disrespect by giving him a card, women were taking a step towards equality and male accountability. As highlighted by Stephen Robertson, men were able to withdraw agency from women by deliberately choosing to “portray girls as passive” as a

¹ Minnesota Historical Society, “Feminist Sexual Harassment Card,” 1.

way of “controlling female sexuality”² and reinforcing the reality that women were subject to men’s desires. The emphasis on female passivity was so widespread in society that it was reflected and intensified in animal breeding practices; as Gabriel Rosenberg contends, men believed that “female bodies were passive receptacles for male desire,”³ so there was essentially no consideration of the female animals’ comfort during breeding. Resisting the concept of female passivity, the “Feminist Card” is a tangible, defiant statement that women were no longer willing to settle for being objects of male desire.

In addition to providing opposition to passivity, the “Feminist Card” represents the reclamation of sexual autonomy for women and epitomizes the firm statement that patriarchal societies are unsustainable. While the card’s existence is indicative of the deeply embedded misogyny that women have had to combat, it also offers an optimistic undertone that reveals the growing support for the women’s rights movement and the expanded condemnation of inherently oppressive actions toward women. The tone of the message also momentarily reverses the roles and prompts the man to contemplate the severity of maltreating women. To suppress female autonomy, men have long dictated the terms of dating and marriage, structuring relationships so that the women are eternally indebted to men. Between the 1880s and 1920s, many of the United States’ metropolitan areas were facing an explosion in pre-marital romance and sex, as men were capitalizing on financially dependent young women. As Kathy Peiss details, since many women were unable to financially contribute to dates, “[they] offered sexual favors of varying degrees,

² Stephen Robertson, “Age of Consent Law and the Making of Modern Childhood in New York City, 1886-1921,” *Journal of Social History* 35.4 (2002), 788.

³ Gabriel Rosenberg, “Where Are Animals in the History of Sexuality?” *Notches* (2 September 2014).

ranging from flirtatious companionship to sexual intercourse,”⁴ which led men to increase the extravagance of dates under the assumption that women would parallelly increase their sexual favors. Consequently, the female aspiration for financial stability and the male lust for sexual favors exacerbated each other until women were forced to endure sexualization in the dating scene, and men perpetually expected sexual repayment at the end of every date.

While men were imposing sexual expectations onto women, women were attempting to defy the very fundamental construction of transactional relationships. The “Feminist Card” rejects the idea that women owed sexual favors to men and proposes equal autonomy and sexual independence in relationships. In early 20th century relationships, men imposed patriarchal gender roles to limit independence and restrict their partners’ capacity to deny sexual intercourse. According to Julia Laite, “romantic love and sanctioned union is only a hair’s breadth away from prostitution,”⁵ in that many men preferred transactional relationships that were, “for much of human history, a trade for women.”⁶ Ironically, while women were labeled as prude and undesirable partners if they refused to engage in treating practices with men, they were often simultaneously shamed for engaging in pre-marital sex or transactional relationships reminiscent of prostitution.⁷ Worse yet, in instances where financial means failed to convince a woman to engage in sexual favors, many men turned to sexual assault to achieve their reprehensible impulses. As long as men were in charge of determining the terms of the transactional relationships,

⁴ Kathy Peiss, “Charity Girls and City Pleasures,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18.4 (July 2004), 14.

⁵ Julia Laite, “Valentine’s as Prostitution, Marriage as a Trade: Commerce, Sex, History (and a Recipe),” *Notches*, (14 February 2014).

⁶ Julia Laite, “Valentine’s as Prostitution.”

⁷ Kathy Peiss, “Charity Girls,” 15.

women were coerced into enduring the mistreatment or risk lacking the means to support themselves; the role of the “Feminist Card” was to challenge the structure of relationships that required women to sacrifice their sexual empowerment to remain viable partners.

While there are endless areas of improvement remaining, the “Feminist Card” is embedded in the invaluable transition from women needing to earn their identity to being able to create an identity for themselves. By opposing passivity standards, transactional relationships, and the notion of being subjects of male pleasure, women were able to assert autonomy and resist the enduring patriarchal structure of society. The contrived gender standards that led to the sexualization and mistreatment of women were challenged by second wave feminist efforts like the “Feminist Card,” which ignited the trend of actively confronting sexism and establishing women as the sole authority over their sexuality.