

Meet the woke misogynist

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Nona Willis Aronowitz

Nona is the features editor at Fusion. Before coming here, she was editor of TPM's The Slice, a reporter at NBC News Digital, and an associate editor at GOOD. She's still a believer (sorry).

By [Nona Willis Aronowitz](#)

I usually stretch a Tinder chat over days or even weeks, warily circling a guy to make sure he seems like a decent human. But on that sticky summer night, Bob* put me at ease right away. He was in an open relationship, just like me. He talked frankly and respectfully about sex. He said he was a “giver.” He agreed on “no sexpectations” when we made plans for a last-minute date. I can’t say for sure because he would later unmatched me, but I think his Tinder profile boasted that he was a feminist.

Once at the bar, I couldn’t tell if I was attracted, but we had a pleasant time, anyway. Bob seemed adventurous, smart, fun, and horny. He told me he was an “erotic massage therapist,” working with sexual trauma victims and teaching them how to orgasm again. He touched my leg almost immediately, then said, “Let me know if this is too much.” After an hour or two, I decided we would have a light hookup to see if there was any physical spark. I went back to his place around the corner from the bar, after clearly announcing my boundaries. “Just a makeout,” I insisted. He said that was fine.

After a few minutes in his bedroom, it was clear it was not fine. We started kissing and I felt mildly turned on. Then I didn’t. I told Bob I had to go, but he pressed. Coquettishly, quietly, I said, “Stop.” He pressed more. Then I said, “No, really, *stop*.” When I faced away from him to jiggle my bra back in place, he came up behind me and tried yet again. At one point, he pushed me onto his bed and said, “Wait a minute, I still haven’t made you come.”

Eventually, I was firm—“I REALLY have to go!”—and made my way to the door, although I kissed him goodnight rather than leaving in a huff. “Next time,” I assured him. As soon as I was on the street, I cried confused tears, surprised at myself for letting my guard down so quickly and then not even acting angry. Did that scenario really just happen between two Brooklyn feminists?

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Tinder Bob is a cinematic example of an infuriating phenomenon: the woke misogynist. The woke misogynist is a guy who talks a big game about gender equality and consent, uses vocabulary like “triggering” without rolling his eyes, wears a pussy hat to the Women’s March, prefers to fuck feminists and may freely call himself one, too—then turns around and harasses you, assaults you, or belittles you. Perhaps his behavior throws you off because, unlike the [whimpster](#) or [emosogynist](#) of the aughts, he’s confident in himself and his pro-woman bonafides. Or because he apologizes nicely and indulges you in a thoughtful conversation after the offending incident. Or, most likely, because his misogyny is more ambiguous and subtle than that of, say, Bill Cosby or Roger Ailes or Donald Trump.

The woke misogynist is also harder to pin down than the garden-variety progressive man who just happens to have

a blind spot when it comes to women. These “[Ninos](#)”—named after Elena Ferrante’s charming, philandering intellectual, Nino Sarratore—have always existed. During the Sixties, it was perfectly commonplace for anti-war activists and civil rights leaders to ridicule or ignore women’s liberation; unapologetic movement sexism was part of what led to Second Wave feminism in the first place.

This pattern was hypocritical in a grander sense, in that someone purporting to be for human rights shouldn’t go around abusing or dismissing women. But unlike the woke misogynist, these men’s bigotry was unflinching, their hostility blatant. Woody Allen and Stokely Carmichael and Norman Mailer may have been pillars of the left, but they certainly never claimed to be feminists.

Being a male feminist is admirable. Being a male feminist can even get you laid.

Now that feminism has become more fashionable, it’s harder to tell who our true allies are. Self-proclaimed male feminists are everywhere, from [dating apps](#) to [Silicon Valley](#) to [Hollywood](#). Many men now want to be equal partners and parents. They believe a woman [should be president](#) and they [follow Kamala Harris on Twitter](#). They would never dream of saying indisputably sexist things in public. Many male feminists are genuine, even if they’re not perfect. They will try and sometimes fail on their way to enlightenment. [We care about the men in our lives](#), so we are happy to explain what they’ve done wrong. We will gently chide our guy friends for objectifying their female lovers or about how their favorite films don’t pass [the Bechdel test](#).

And they’ll usually listen, because being a male feminist is admirable. Being a male feminist can even get you laid.

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When I put out a call for “woke misogynist” stories, I received tales of behavior all across the spectrum: The college guy who bought his girlfriend feminist zines and also slapped her so hard she reeled backwards. The boss who was an enemy of the patriarchy on the internet but regularly intimidated and talked down to his female employees. The outspoken women’s rights advocate who went out of his way to call Kellyanne Conway ugly.

Women recalled chronic patronizing, compulsive maninterrupting, and classic sexism excused with self-awareness (“I know this is super-sleazy of me, but...”). Riot Grrrl icon Kathleen Hanna, who skewered her woke misogynist fans last year in her song [“Mr. So and So,”](#) told me she “was raped in college by a guy who’d read more feminist books than [she] had.”

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I heard countless versions of my awful Tinder date: a supposedly feminist guy who bent or broke the rules of consent in some uncanny, unsettling, unconventional way. The worst thing about this phenomenon, one woman remarked, is that it’s often “a general feeling, not necessarily a momentous incident. And that makes it feel less real.”

Since woke misogyny can come with a hefty dose of gaslighting, it’s difficult to tell whether it’s calculated or not. One thirtysomething woman I’ll call Clara recounted a story of how a man had impressed her on a date by pointing out that the social life of their mutual circle of friends involved dudes playing in bands...and their girlfriends watching them. “We talked about how ironic it was that this ostensibly progressive group of guys had built this sexist scene around themselves,” she recalled. “It kind of sealed the deal—I liked this guy.”

When he sexually assaulted her one drunken night, Clara found herself paralyzed the next morning. “Everything he’d said before seemed like a trick to get me in bed,” she said, “and also just left me really confused after the fact—had things really gone down like that? He seemed like a really nice guy.”

Nice. Reasonable. The kind of man you could confront with the very behavior he claims to denounce. And when those confrontations actually happen with a woke misogynist, it can be the biggest mindfuck of all.



When I got home from the date with Bob, I noticed he had texted me: “Home safe?” Embarrassed by my conciliatory goodnight kiss, I decided to recap what had just transpired. If anyone could have a rational conversation about consent, it was us two, right?

“Yeah, I got home safe,” I wrote. “But I do have to say, I feel a little funny about what just happened.”

I called him out for ignoring my boundaries, for not stopping when I put my foot down. To my immense relief, he responded with all the right things: “I feel like an animal and not good,” he texted back. “Are you ok? 😊 I am really not happy with myself and I am sorry.”

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The conversation went on for an hour. I admitted that my initial arousal had thrown me off. He admitted he “really wasn’t listening.” I asked him what exactly he was thinking. “At the moment, I have no excuse,” he replied. “But what was in my head was a playful vibe and perhaps a struggle to present myself as more masculine. I don’t know...I’ve heard the other side. Your side. From so many lovers, partners, clients, and empathize but have never been on the end that I am now.”



I went to bed feeling shaken, but also validated and encouraged that genuine progress had taken place. *Maybe there is hope after all*, I thought. But I wasn’t sure. Was it a manipulation? If yes, was it planned? Is this his M.O.? Did he really mean what he said?

The thing about being a woke misogynist who attracts confident feminists is that he’s more likely to get challenged. These men, in turn, are unusually willing to Talk It Out, often leading to maddening head games. After her assault, Clara launched into a “long, ill-advised, fruitless campaign to get him to admit what he did.” Her rapist initially explained his behavior by offering that his last girlfriend liked rough sex and he thought she would, too. Five years later, he sent her a Facebook message saying “he regretted something ‘weird’ going down between us because he thinks I’m really cool.”

Some confrontations are more sinister, like on a recent episode of *Girls* where Hannah is summoned to the apartment of Chuck Palmer, a famous writer who’d been accused of sexual assault. Chuck gradually disarms Hannah with a stimulating and nuanced debate, by calling her “funny,” by insisting he wants to “get to know” her, that she’s “more to [him] than just a pretty face.” Then, when Hannah trusts him enough to lie next to him on a bed, Chuck pulls out his dick. *New Yorker* writer Emily Nussbaum, echoing Clara, [invokes a suspicion](#) about woke misogynists we may never get to confirm: “His true kink seemed to be tricking her into it.”

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The morning after the Tinder date, I woke up to another text from Bob. “I’m available if you have more thoughts to share,” he wrote. “Sorry, again, that I blew it.” Then, a moment later, the most tone-deaf text in the history of tone-deaf texts:

Date redo. I can set my table up and gift you a mock massage! With def clear boundaries. 😊 or i make you dinner or a yummy smoothie.

It was the textual equivalent of a semi-hard dick on my leg—the moment I knew that either he was totally clueless or was playing a long con. It was unfathomable to him that a woman whom he'd violated the night before never, ever wanted his hands anywhere near her body again. He unmatched me on Tinder shortly after I politely declined. Later I found out from a mutual Facebook friend something even more disturbing: that a few months back, she had booked Bob on a panel she organized. The topic was “Better Sex,” offering “solutions to challenges that surface around consent and pleasure.”

The mutual friend assured me this was an age-old pattern, that people often condemn the very things they're most ashamed of, and are fascinated by their own vices. Like a drug counselor who's secretly addicted to drugs. Like an evangelical senator who's caught soliciting sex workers. It was heartbreaking to see the language of feminism co-opted by someone who so clearly didn't get it, and yet no one who heard this story was surprised.

Of course, not every woke misogynist is so deeply hypocritical, and not every confrontation with one is pointless or icky. One woman, who I'll call Maya, was stunned and skeeved out after a professional male feminist with heteroflexible vibes initiated unsolicited degrading BDSM scenes in bed. Later, she gave him a talking-to: “You really need to be careful with your behavior,” she told him, and he wholeheartedly agreed. He hadn't known the protocol—Ask first!—and later made it his business to learn it. “It was a real wakeup call for him,” she said. They're still friends.

But even though Maya's was the best-case scenario, it still left her feeling depressed. “If men who say they're feminist aren't, then what are the men who don't say it?” she said. “The solution is to just accept that all men are going to have internalized misogyny. It's always going to be there. We just have to determine to what extent.”

**Name has been changed to protect privacy.*