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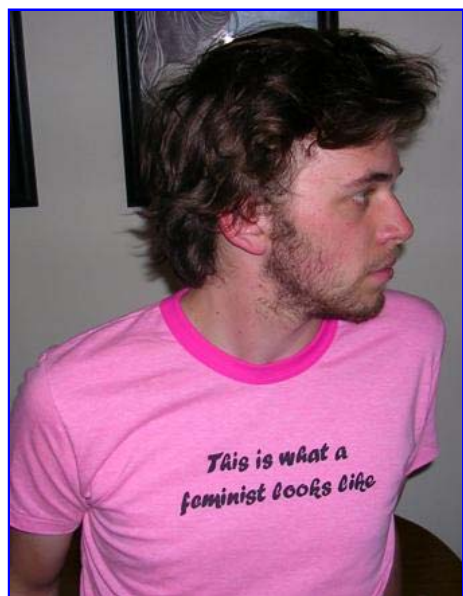
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Faux Feminist Men and Other Figments (Real and Imagined)

April 18, 2011

By [Heather Laine Talley](#)



Last spring, I offered a “Feminist Theory” course, and a startling thing happened. More men signed up for the class than women. When I saw the class roll, I was boggled and, truth be told, terrified. Was this a delightfully uncanny scenario, or was something more sinister going on? Had male students organized to undermine the teaching of feminist theory?

It’s true. I turned to conspiracy theories because my wildest dream—that a large number of men might be interested in feminism seemed too good to be true. Can you blame me? What seems more likely in this socio-historical moment—that our culture is rapidly evolving to make room for transformative notions of gender or that anti-feminist organizing is popping up to undermine the very spaces carved out to do feminist work? Can you imagine a situation in which a Planned Parenthood employee is baited to respond to questions regarding a truly awful and very complicated situation while being secretly recorded only to have the video deceptively edited and released to the public in an effort to de-fund the only nationwide explicitly feminist healthcare provider? Oh right, that happened. (P.S.: Trafficked women need healthcare too, and trying to figure out how to get it for them is not an endorsement of human trafficking but rather a feminist conundrum. To be sure, the employee in question seemed rather unfazed, but I wonder how I might have responded in the same

situation if I thought that being complicit might produce better health outcomes for women whose bodies were being so thoroughly discarded already.)

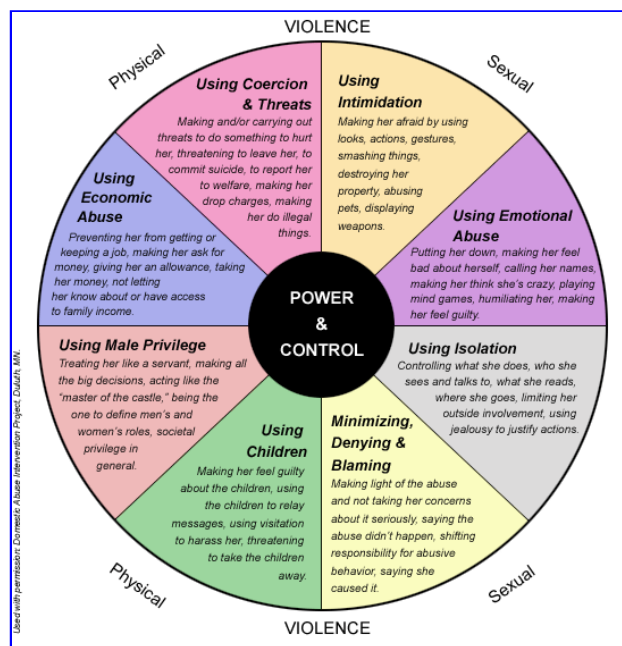
I spent winter break strategizing (just in case), and yet that strange and inexplicable roll yielded an enchanting pedagogical moment. Men showed up, read feminist theory and wrestled. One wrote a letter to his girlfriend apologizing for the ways his consumption of porn had shaped how he looked at and responded to her body. Another thought about how to undermine dude culture within the confines of the informally sex segregated world of competitive road biking. A different student wrote a song which included the gem, “The way to my heart is not through my penis.” It took me a minute, but after listening, I got it. Circa 1950s housewife caricatures who can cook their way into your heart are so out, but twenty-first century girlfriends with porn star sensibilities are so in. In short, the experience was a feminist teacher’s dream.

I find it interesting that men are seemingly self-identifying as feminist at higher rates at precisely the same moment in history in which female college students are visibly repulsed by the label. Partly, this makes sense to me. In an era of heightened militarism and disaster capitalism, isn’t it more obvious than ever how we—men and women alike—get screwed by “patriarchy” or rather cultural values that are particularly hegemonically masculine?

While I am ecstatic about the cultivation of feminist masculinities, I worry that sometimes self-identifying as feminist is for many men more style than substance. In particular, I wonder about the degree to which self-identified feminist men are engaging in real grappling with male privilege and feminist issues. It’s true. I’m calling out feminist men’s authenticity, but I am biased. I know faux feminism intimately.

I became acquainted with faux feminist men in graduate school. I encountered academics who wielded their knowledge of postmodern feminism like a badge of courage and told tales out of school about sleeping with said theorists. Something about these disclosures always felt oh so un-feminist. Maybe it was the fact that these stories violated the privacy of the women in question, or maybe it was because the tone of these anecdotes was smug in a way that suggested, “Yes even Ms. So&So yields when confronted with a bastion of masculinity such as myself.”

Recently, I have watched a man who has spent the last twenty years deeply engaged in feminist politics use modes of physical intimidation to bully the new boyfriend of an ex-girlfriend. Faux-feminism plays out in breaking tried and true feminist rules—Don’t use threats of violence...ever— but also via old fashioned misogyny. I will not be the first nor the last to point out that sexism is bound up with queerness in bizarre ways. The last several folks to comment uninvited on my “ass” (which is alternately referred to as “fat” or “hot”) were gay “feminist” men. As many women and feminist men have pointed out, gay does not insulate one from male privilege. And, by the way, commentary on women’s bodies disguised as “compliments” still produces the dehumanizing experience of being under surveillance.



Unsurprisingly, privilege is what gives birth to faux feminism. In

certain circles, claiming “feminist” as an identity does actually grant one a kind of status. It’s a sub-cultural currency. The problem is that “feminist” is not simply an identity. It’s a politic, so retaining one’s grasp on male privilege while self-identifying as feminist is not just problematic but rather fundamentally untenable. We might be incredibly postmodern in our capacity to wrestle with tension and contradiction, but this is one uncanny coupling making for a particularly pathological kind of synergy.

Yet faux feminism is not simply the result of one’s desire to “be a feminist” and retain male privilege. Ironically, faux feminism is actually the bastard of the very culture that makes feminism necessary in the first place. Recently, I flipped through a conference program to see a paper with an explicitly feminist title authored by a faux-feminist man. I know that this man is a faux-feminist because I know him...intimately. A friend of mine, who happens to be a feminist, and I brainstormed about possible feminist interventions. We toyed with the idea of protesting the session with signs painted with the following slogans: “Down with Faux Feminism,” “Feminism is a Verb Not a Theory,” and finally, “Sometimes Men with Nice Thoughts Have Mean Hands.” Finally, she suggested we attend wearing shirts that simply read “FRAUD.”

I will save all of us the gory details about how I, a feminist, was intimately involved with a man who publicly declared himself a feminist but privately resembled a kind of hypermasculine (and decidedly not feminist) cliché. Telling those stories, while juicy, would not facilitate what I hope for him, which is deep self reflection and messy transformation. Revealing them most certainly does serve my greatest good. It is important to understand though that he was a practiced expert at those behaviors chronicled on feminists’ trusty “Power and Control” wheel—denying and minimizing abusive behavior, using jealousy to justify controlling actions, employing looks and gestures to evoke fear, etc., etc. He also knew feminism backwards and forwards—theory, politics and culture. His faux feminism was not the result of his reluctance to release his grasp on male privilege, though maybe that was part of it. The explanation of his faux feminism is infinitely more complicated and more heartbreaking than that.

Over coffee with a feminist man deeply entrenched in the processes of identifying his own privilege and actively working to confront men’s (primary) role in perpetuating sexual violence, he remarked about how inexplicable the phenomenon of faux feminism among men is. And then it clicked. Faux feminism should come as no surprise at all.

Looking across the table at a feminist man, I recalled why I and so many of my friends and colleagues were drawn to feminism in the first place. The consequences of misogyny and hyper-masculinity structure our life stories. Many feminists know what physical violence feels like in our bones or how walking on proverbial eggshells for fear of emotional assaults effects a deep and sustained cost to our wellbeing. We are feminists because we know the costs of living in a non-feminist world. And by “we” I mean women and men alike. There’s the rub. Men come to feminism for many of the same reasons that women do.

This is certainly the case for my faux feminist ex. He had tasted what home sweet homey violence felt like. He understood maybe more than many men, why feminism exists in the first place. Of course, there was the sub-cultural cache of identifying as a feminist man too, but it was more than that. There is the tricky little fact often cited in our discussions of violence and abuse—that “victims” become “perpetrators.” Of course, we mean this quite literally. Those that experience threats to their person often violate another’s person. This is the cycle of violence. What this explanation fails to clarify is that these dynamics potentially produce two long-term effects—the embodied knowledge of how to use hegemonic masculinity as a life skill and the desire to change the world so that the violence endemic to masculinity is eradicated. Why then didn’t my ex embody feminism in an authentic way? Why was his feminist “faux” and not simply just feminist? Because as much as he wanted to embrace feminism, his toolbox for coping with everyday life was chock full of anti-feminist strategies.

Currently, the unicorn has extraordinary cache. In some measure, this is because hipsters who were children during the early 1980s (another moment in which unicorn imagery was all the rage) are now the adults designing the bric-a-brac featured in the home section at your “local” Urban Outfitters. Partially though, there is something particularly compelling about unicorns. The unicorn is a unique kind of figment. They are magic and not in that ephemeral kind of way, but in that almost real way. Face it. Unicorns are just horses with a horn. Almost

real but not quite.

Surely, I could conclude by suggesting that faux feminist men are akin to a particularly dark figment of our imaginations. One could argue that faux feminist men are a kind of monster who work their way into the emotional, political and intellectual spaces that are cultivated in the service of transformation and safety. One could argue that faux feminist men are the kind of monsters who wait for you underneath your bed to debase sweet dreams of egalitarianism and justice and love. But in my imagination, faux feminist men are figments of another sort. Like unicorns they are almost real, almost but not quite. And I don't mean they are almost monstrous men. I believe that faux feminist men are almost feminist but not quite feminist. Sometimes the "almost" is a result of a deep reluctance to interrogate male privilege, but sometimes the "almost" is an outcome of experiencing and reproducing the very dynamics feminism is built to challenge. Unicorns have captured our popular imaginations. My hope is that these particular men capture feminist imaginations because there is something magical that could happen by not immediately dismissing faux-feminist men as not real feminists.

I think it's fair to say that the men who registered for my Feminist Theory course were not feminists when the semester began. It's fair to say because I asked them if they were feminists, and most of them said no. It's also the case that they changed. They changed because they connected some of their own traumas and hurts—both the violence of bullying and the cost of never being able to do "man" quite well enough—to a culture that is structured by and celebrates a particular kind of masculinity. But their transformation was not simply self-serving. The men in that classroom came to see their own status as "not-feminist" as part of the problem, and ultimately, they chose to use their powers for "good." As a teacher and as a feminist, I believe that most of us will make that choice when given the opportunity. Feminists (real ones men and women alike) might invest more in providing those opportunities. That would be magic.

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15 Responses to *Faux Feminist Men and Other Figments (Real and Imagined)*

1. [Rachel M. J. Ray](#) on April 18, 2011 at 12:08 pm

English...I need a translation please... 😊

[Reply](#)

- Heather Laine Talley on April 21, 2011 at 1:10 pm

I too can have this feeling when reading other people's work. Can you let me know what in particular is unclear, and I'd be more than happy to talk it through.

[Reply](#)

2. Nicole A. Spigner on April 18, 2011 at 6:39 pm

Heather,

Thank you for this! You give a fair assessment of the very tension that serves to stop, frustrate, and derail so many of our feminist efforts (not to mention our senses of self and agency).

So many thanks,
Nikki

[Reply](#)

- Heather Laine Talley on April 21, 2011 at 2:58 pm

much appreciated!

[Reply](#)

3. Carolyn on April 19, 2011 at 1:29 pm

Heather,

Thanks for this article. I resonate with it, and think it also has important implications for how male 'feminist' often interact with their female graduate students.

Carolyn