

Cold Drink

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The Fake Male Feminist Chicanery by Minh Nguyen

Posted on [October 14, 2013](#) by [Kiese](#)



Some personal thoughts on this wily breed ...

This last summer, a straight male friend and I cozied up on his sofa with his laptop and, to sate my nosiness, perused his OkCupid account. My friend received a graduate degree in gender studies and is intimidatingly informed about both theoretical and pop feminism, which was invariably conveyed on his dating profile. In his inbox, women responded positively to his profile's reference of the "manic pixie dream girl" trope (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqJUxqkcKKA>). "I'm just so glad you know about that," they lauded. "It's so refreshing to see a guy get it." Their receptiveness made sense. In the online dating mineshaft, my

friend—who not only appeared sane and had photo proof that he goes outdoors, but also displayed some awareness of feminism(!)—was a glitter-dipped gemstone. I was struck with revelation. *Of course. The male feminist card gets you play.*

Flash back a year, and I'm cozy on my own sofa with my own laptop, watching a video in which social commentator Jay Smooth speaks out (<http://vimeo.com/44117178>) about the Anita Sarkeesian controversy. In his video response to the violent and threatening reactions from men toward Sarkeesian's criticisms of gaming culture's hostility toward women, Smooth rebukes not only the offenders but also those who turn the other cheek, asserting that "we need to treat [this kind of abuse and harassment] like it matters". His demand to his "fellow dudes": "When [we] see something like that going on, [we] have an obligation to speak out against it more often."

In a different tab on my browser, I'd pulled up an interview with novelist Junot Diaz, whose *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* I was engrossed with at the time. In this interview (http://www.salon.com/2012/07/02/the_search_for_decolonial_love/), Diaz discloses that despite the criticism many women writers of color received from men of color in the 80s, he himself feels a certain indebtedness to the women writers for creating "a set of strategies" that would become "the basis of [his] art." Diaz goes on to state that "what [these women writers of color] were producing in knowledge was something that I needed to hear in order to understand myself in the world, and that no one—least of all male writers of color—should be trying to silence."

Here I witnessed two men behaving in what to me were very radical and admirable ways, defending women who had received sexist backlash from other men. I rarely saw straight men raise a skeptical brow at sexism, much less spoke out against it to other men. Like many others of their audience, I felt affirmed, supported, and grateful to have them as advocates. I felt full of conviction. *These are real men. These men are how all men should be.*

If you frequent the same nook of media as I do, it's likely you know and love these men, too. Salon crowned Jay Smooth as one of the sexiest men of 2008, and between my circles and what I've observed on his Twitter and Instagram, there appears to be plenty of those open to the prospect of being "Mrs. Jay Smooth". Junot Diaz,

although more controversial, has also received praise for his feminist-oriented writing, and at the Facing Race conference in 2012 where Diaz spoke the keynote, the first (and second) question of his Q & A was an emboldened “Are you single?” These male feminists get a lot of love in the minds and hearts of straight women. We love them, and not in the way we love our Uncle Rays.

While they both are replete with admirable qualities, being outspokenly pro-woman is a giant, glossy cherry. They, too, are diamonds in a mineshaft. When most men I encounter at bars, on television, and in the news make remarks about women that make my insides feel grimy, a man who attempts to veer off the sexist path will lower my guard. Of course I greet the change of pace with relief, ease, and even a bit of sexual attraction.

Back then I would read and watch Smooth and Diaz, wish to the plush stuff above that more men would be like them, then close my laptop, leave my apartment, and in my own small life, meet, become intimate with, and perpetually get bamboozled by disingenuous men. During my last year of undergrad, as I upheld Smooth and Diaz as acmes of *good men*, I would meet a man who led a feminism reading group and become involved with the women, pissing them off to vision-blurring rage. I would meet a man who writes his thesis on Audre Lorde’s idea of a lesbian consciousness but was always the last to leave a party, eyes darting around for inebriated women, prospective bedmates. I would meet countless self-proclaimed feminists whose mouths would ask, “Have you read *Gender Troubles*?” while their body language asks, “Is that the passcode to your pants?” And I would pardon these men over and over again, because they behaved, at least initially, like my male feminist role models. They, too, presented themselves as advocates for women, and they, too, all sounded like I thought “anti-sexist” men should sound.

As I observe the public appraisal of two men I don’t know and the bad behavior of the men I do, I can’t help but make loose connections between the two. The men I know who behave disingenuously, the nominal feminists, seem to have had their acts reinforced somehow. And I worry that the appraisal of men who can articulate a feminist critique begets scheming imitators, men who file “feminist” in their rolodex of pick-up artistry because they’ve seen it result positively. Lack game? Try this formula: mention x feminist theorist, y lamentation about political issue that attacks women’s rights, z assertion about sexual consent. That tactic alone may work on someone, and that’s utterly scary.

I attended a large university in Seattle, and one drawback of being surrounded by educated and well-read people is that, if there’s a benefit, they can be magicians with language, chameleons about who they are through the use of words. With issues as intimate as dating and feminism, it’s not only ironic to be deceived by empty sentiments of anti-sexism, it’s dangerous. What troubles me is that for many women I know, sexual assault and date rape remain a common experience, despite “male feminism” becoming more fashionable over the years.

In my ideal world, the misogynists would be ultra-detectable, with facial pocks and sulfury odors and grunt “wiggle your glazed donut ass for me.” I would even take the world as I thought it a few years ago, where misogynists talk like Tucker Max and live in Greek houses and call women “biddies.” But confusingly, misogynists are sometimes men who speak softly and eat vegan and say “a woman’s sexual freedom is an essential component to her liberation. So come here.” It’s a tricky world out there. And while I’d prefer a critical approach to gender from men I elect, read, and even bed, in my experience, the so-called feminist men I’ve met deep down have not been less antagonistic or bigoted toward women. What I see over and over again is misogyny in sheep’s clothing, and at this point, I would rather see wolves as wolves.

Given the dearth of men who acknowledge, much less *pretend* to care about, sexism, my words may seem as salty as twice-brined pickles. But as my friends and I joke, we don’t have to be grateful for the crumbs of lazy and fraudulent feminism men give us. And in seriousness, I don’t want to get duped anymore. I don’t want to let my guard down in the company of a man who received a graduate degree in gender studies, deny his sexual advances,

and hear from a mutual friend about how angry and baffled he was at my refusal, because he was “expecting it.” I no longer want this sort of surprise-in-hindsight, but I also don’t want to relinquish all hope, and that is going to require extreme critical flexing toward so-called straight male allies.

My wish to the plush stuff above is no longer for men to imitate Smooth and Diaz on a cursory level, but to make efforts toward more personal reflections of sexism without ulterior motives of appearing more desirable to women. My revised wish, as well, is for me and other women seeking relationships with men to get better at detecting and calling out insincere male feminism, discourage and endanger it, rather than allowing it to continue to flourish through positive reinforcement. My wish is that when we do let our guards down again, that we will be safe in doing so.

Minh Nguyen is a miniature quiet storm brewing in Seattle, WA. Write her at minhnguyenplus@gmail.com.



About Kiese

Kiese Laymon is a fiction writer and essayist who writes frequently on pop culture, hip hop and politics. He is currently teaches English, Africana Studies and Creative Writing at Vassar College.

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78 Responses to *The Fake Male Feminist Chicanery* by Minh Nguyen



Alicia says:

November 26, 2013 at 11:45 pm

My boyfriend and my two best friends are all male allies and I see this constantly. I’m lucky because, when I call them out on it, they recognize it, step away, and try to be better. A lot of male “feminists” I’ve met don’t. In some ways, I allow a little slack for male privilege and socialization. After all, I’m white. I try really hard to be a good ally to people of color, but I fail sometimes and get called out. So, I evaluate my bad behavior and get back in the pony cart to try and be better next time. I’m willing to go through the same process with people who are willing to listen when they stumble on their privilege, just as I’m lucky enough to have friends who will do the same for me. The key is finding those who don’t get defensive when you say, “Hey. Divisive language like “real women do x” isn’t okay. Real women are women, period.”



james says:

November 27, 2013 at 10:19 am

Reading the article after following a quote from Tumblr made me worry that my own attempts to be a proactive feminist ally is so how shallow or self centred. Who doesn’t want to be liked and reassured that their views are correct? But with Alicia’s comment I feel assured as long as I’m willing to learn I won’t become a jackass.



Bebinn says:

November 27, 2013 at 4:41 pm

Wow, Andrew, a “Feminist” Nice Guy™. Now there’s a terrifying reality.



doug says:

November 28, 2013 at 7:50 am

good article. it is ridiculous to want a slap on the back for something you’re supposed to do. “i am not leering at you and telling you to go back to the kitchen, aren’t i a top guy”
you see it more and more these days, especially on twitter.

**Laura says:**

November 28, 2013 at 9:33 am

This kind of men have done a great work at adopting the feminist rhetoric and discourse, but are yet to live by it... I do agree I prefer to see the wolves as wolves, but if all this is true (as my own instinct tells me when I potentially talk to one of these guys), then I guess we're doomed.
Some things change to remain all the same.

**Anonymous says:**

November 28, 2013 at 1:08 pm

This is so stupid people want to fuck.

sexism, and wanting to fuck are mutually exclusive.

I dont like football, but if i did and a girl spoke to me about football would i need to be worried she was just trying to get in my pants.

too far left is just as bat shit crazy and ignorant as too far right.

My great grand mother was friends with Matilda Joslyn Gage and participated in hunger strikes to gain woman the right to vote, and on her death bed... I was 9 she told."feminist have gone insane,"

**BM says:**

November 28, 2013 at 3:03 pm

This is interesting and well written. Feminism needs to continue growing despite and around this problem instead of finding a direct way to target it. Are there going to be men who use feminist rhetoric toward anti-woman ends? Yes. But will calling them out entrench them further and isolate them, instead of finding a way to reach them and reverse their poisonous behavior? Likely. This is a thorny problem, that requires a more holistic solution than direct confrontation. Direct confrontation is effective for a very specific set of conflicts — the Tucker Max's of the world. I wonder whether these characters — these fake feminist nice guys — are themselves more complex than you're making them out to be. I wonder if there's more to the story — if hearing their side would allow for individual ways to address individual manifestations of patriarchy. By the way, I certainly don't know half as much about pop feminism or academic feminism, as the writer, or apparently, the subject of this piece, so I humbly apologize in advance if this comes off as tone deaf.

**chingona says:**

November 28, 2013 at 5:27 pm

Dudebro commenters feigning feminism: this is not about you getting laid or having girlfriends. Fuck that noise.

**Sam says:**

November 29, 2013 at 1:34 am

Thanks for the post. It's sad, but definitely something to be aware of. "Fortunately" all the men around me think feminism is a swear word and are more than happy to loudly proclaim their disrespect for women (or people of other ethnicity...), so I won't ever run risk of assuming one of them is even remotely sane. It's painful, but at least the sides are clear.

**Eric Harrison says:**

November 29, 2013 at 9:57 am

There's a term for this you know. We call them "White Knights". Standing up for women when their main goal is to gain points.

**Adam Whittock** says:

November 29, 2013 at 12:10 pm

One of the what articles I've ever read – not only because of its articulation but also because of its timeliness. This needed to be said. We need to pick up on this argument and apply it to all self-identifying male feminists. Why do men 'become' feminist?

**Minichirops** says:

November 29, 2013 at 12:52 pm

So what are the rules here?

On the one hand, you never want to be Tucker Max. Objectification is bad. People don't react well to being stuck in a box and told about the attributes they probably have just because they share a statistical majority of traits with other people who have whatever attributes are being attributed to them.

I'm white, and male. I don't like being told that everything's my fault, because ... well, it's not. I consume coffee, read books and try to get through college. I haven't affected the world in any meaningful way yet.

So I get it — you're black and you get tired of people assuming you shoplift, or you're female and annoyed with the objectification of women.

But it sounds like being merely chivalrous is going to be interpreted as an attempt to get it someone's pants, and feminism (defined as advocacy of the belief in female-male equality) can't reasonably be a minimal requirement — it can't be considered the minimum acceptable bound on male decency, because unless women are expected to advocate that men are as good as women, expecting men to advocate the inverse is actually being unfair toward *men*.

So I'm not sure what I'm expected to do — innocent inaction seems to be read as misogyny, whereas action may be read as misandry.

Thoughts?

**SOUTHERN** says:

November 29, 2013 at 4:46 pm

Dear Minichirops,

My advice for you and for any male is the following: first of all, think about what you really want (e.g., getting laid with different women is perfectly valid as long as you don't lie about it, and face the consequences, i.e., not being able to date the same girl for long; looking for a "traditional" relationship, where you are the breadwinner is also valid as long as you are honest about it, etc.), and then act with respect and care. The key is to consider that "the others" (women in this case) are people who deserve your respect and should respect you as well. Don't get too angry if women falsely accuse you of being sexist (after all, we're not infallible and can be unfair, but this has a lot to do with being surrounded by sexism): just ask them to explain things politely. If they do, think about what they are saying as honestly as you can. Take them seriously. If you can't, admit it to yourself but don't patronize them. Just say "I must admit I disagree." If you see their point and agree, just say "I had never seen it that way," which does not mean that they now have a right to call you stupid or a sexist pig.

Never assume that you are right or that they are right.

**Anonymous** says:

November 29, 2013 at 5:50 pm

You people are nuts

**JD** says:

November 29, 2013 at 11:54 pm

There are real feminist men out there, and they give a shit about dudebros in feminist clothing, I promise you. The problem is it is nigh unto impossible for the feminist men to suss them out.



nancy says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:31 am

In my experience a lot of men these days pay lip service to feminism and equality, but you don't learn the truth until you're in a relationship with them and find they expect you to do all the housework. I remember arguing with one supposedly enlightened boyfriend about the imbalance of housework and his assumption that as a woman, I will automatically pick up his slack. He responded angrily with "Well if you want me to do something then tell me what to do!" Point missed completely.



LearningFunny says:

November 30, 2013 at 11:16 am

Love this. 'I was struck with revelation. Of course. The male feminist card gets you play.' It's amazing. Thanks for writing.



Tom Webster says:

November 30, 2013 at 1:45 pm

To be honest, I found this quite saddening. Without querying the columnist's experiences at all, there was a tendency towards the end of the article to expand the perfectly reasonable condemnation of men who talk the talk but don't walk the walk to include more men who 'speak softly and eat vegan' under the suspicion of ulterior motives. I do not doubt for a minute the existence of faux feminist men but also know many who have learned, read and been activist in the work for gendered social justice without it being a sexual tactic. Maybe there is an element of age and social circles, but I can honestly say that I have been a feminist since I discovered what it meant since my teens in the late 70s and expect I will be so for the rest of my life. I would very rarely feel the need to introduce myself as such; it becomes pretty much as plain as the fact that I have freckles from my behaviour. I've been in a relationship for more than twelve years and at no point has being in that secure relationship lessened my appetite for feminism or my activism in related work or education. (And to pre-emptively anticipate some of the responses that have already appeared on site, I expect no 'credit' for not being a misogynist in the same way that I would expect no 'credit' for not being a racist or homophobe; I'm not interested in credit merely hoping to contribute to a better world.)



simona says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:01 pm

thanks for posting this, i have been starting to reflect on this issue as several people around, male left activists, have also claimed a feminist identification for themselves. goes much in the same line as another article read these days about poly-amorous relationships and guys describing their participation in them as "emotional hedging".



Rob says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:12 pm

Once while at a bar i noticed this while having a discussion about objectifying women to a group of men who i had only just met, it annoyed me how afterwards when i had had a discussion with a lady who became involved in the discussion that "it works that feminism s**t" which makes it all feel a bit futile! they obviously missed the point entirely.

i think there's always a danger of hypocrisy because as men we are a product of the society and sometimes we'll do things that aren't in line with how we want to be as feminists, i think it's important to be aware of that though and take the little knock backs as lessons to learn how to be a better person rather than someone who walks as a wolf in sheeps clothing. being self aware is a big part of that and there's obviously a responsibility that comes with it. there's a difference though between wearing a mask knowingly and doing things that don't fit with expectations or assumptions people make about you from your standpoint.



Marc says:



November 30, 2013 at 2:14 pm

I entire get the distrust the writer mentions, especially when feminism has become the “in.”

This is one of the reasons I am hesitant to step in and engage women who are in need of help at times. This summer, I was in class and overheard a woman talk to another about an abusive boyfriend. I work as a peer educator on issues of gender violence, but I was hesitant to say anything, and didn't step in to offer her the resources, because I was afraid of seeming like that guy – the guy who uses feminism to take advantage of women at their most vulnerable stages.

After a tearful conversation with my mentor, I was told that intent matters, and that sometimes, we do not always do the right thing, but that we always have the chance to correct it.

This is also another reason I am an advocate of feminist men working with other men and talking about issues of sexism with men. It's rather insulting for men to be preaching to women about issues of sexism and sexual assault. It's something they face nearly each day, and feminist men aren't Anderson Cooper who come to them with breaking news.

On the policy level, it is important that women and men work together, but on an engagement level, I think it is more effective, and much more appropriate, for feminist men to work with and engage men.

**Sam** says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:19 pm

So basically...be a white knight mangina.

yawn next please.

**Prussia1757** says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:32 pm

Feminism is what? Wanting the same opportunities and access as white men have, correct? If a fellow wants to be a feminist he has to pass some sort of litmus test? He has to ally himself to your cause and then not be able to express his desire for women? And if one acts chivalrously, he finds out much to his horror, that no female will have sex with him because he is too nice. Sorry, but this is such a fucked up world. It seems like you want men to act only one way: neutered and testosterone free. Not going to happen. I will respect a female as long as she respects me and I want her to have the same chance to display her skills and lead like so man men have done. Other than that, I will still think about them when I am having sex and not having sex.

**Tasheme** says:

November 30, 2013 at 8:15 pm

I completely agree with your critique of the man who uses feminism simply because he's trying to get into the pants of feminist women, and I will not argue with that on any level. With that being said, I think some of the rhetoric of this article is unfair. Mainly the passage of the grad student who does his thesis on feminist theory, but you find him last to leave the party looking for inebriated women. I genuinely don't know the circumstance you're referring to, so it could have quite possibly been a skeezy situation and in which case, you can ignore everything I'm about to say, but there is a hard line to tread as a straight male and a feminist simultaneously. There really isn't much of any guidance in your dating life. There are very few straight male feminist role models you can look towards, and not all women you become romantically involved with would self-identify as feminist. There are some women are are proactively against some of the feminist behavior a straight male would attempt. Then on a basic level, we're still attracted to women, so we now have to navigate a paradox of wanting to be pro-woman, while understanding that even some of the most radical women I've talked to, still expect me to approach them, and still expect certain standard heteronormative dating procedures. This isn't to say, “woe is me” and making feminism difficult for me as a cis-gendered heterosexual male, but there are some people that are genuine in their efforts to let women know that “hey, I'm genuinely working towards trying to not be as shitty as other people can be”. (I also feel convicted even leaving this comment because it may not be directed at me, and I should just own my privilege and stfu)

All I'm saying is, being a straight male feminist by default makes us suspect, and it's not always the case that there's a intentional ulterior motive, it could genuinely be that they/I have not learned how to navigate the theoretical aspects of our

feminism with the reality of our attraction/interaction with women. Literally everything I was ever taught about women was wrong—even the essential nature of women as a broad category. Now I'm expected to go out into the world and date, without being a shithead, to find the kind of women that would appreciate my goal of not being a shithead, and realize all the nuances of behavior I previously/currently believe to be "normal" is actually perpetuating sexism. There are going to be slip ups.

I'm a minority, and I find this issue with white people, but I can't be upset with people I see are at least making the effort. Patriarchy/white supremacy have saturated all aspects of life, and I can't fault people 100% for not understanding every subtlety of their contribution to oppression. So at the end of the day, I think the fact that they even are attempting to make right what they view as being a fault in our society should be evidence that they're not entirely shitty people.

I apologize if I'm sounding like some fuckhead straight dude ranting about women not understanding the plight of the straight male. I'll shut up now



Sam_C says:

December 1, 2013 at 4:02 am

Guys, stop trying to make it all about you. This is a problem that seriously affects women, and you're jumping straight to how it inconveniences you. Instead of directing your anger at the people being fucked over (i.e. the women), call out fake male-bodied feminists.

Ugh.

Now, I'm off to perpetually confront my internalized -isms.



anewleaf says:

December 1, 2013 at 7:05 am

I think many of my fellow commenters (positive and negative) are missing the self-critique in this article. There is some analysis of faux feminism itself: why it's held, why it's bad, even much about what it is. But the article is less a critique of men than a critique of the fallacy of female gratitude in response to thinly parroted feminism. We're so GRATEFUL for it that we never look beyond the superficial.

Now, some of this is circumstantial. Shallow opportunists rely upon people who do not know them well: the new girl, the casual acquaintance. They seek out people who have not had the time to discover the depth of their character. Because it's a party, and who does that?

But here's an important point: ALL OPPORTUNISTS DO THIS. They polish a socially appealing exterior in order to get what they want. The flaw is not in the population, the flaw is in the perception. There's nothing particularly sinister about the fact that the population of men contains opportunists. There IS a need for women not to toss caution to the wind (or their pants) just because they heard a few well-placed Shakesville quotes. Social cues are just that, social cues. They're just hints.

Frankly, the fact that feminism gets you game is GREAT. Thank the stars that THIS has become social cred. The fact that it is a signal for basic desirability is likewise awesome. But if you care about who a guy is, know him better than his basic desirability. Know his walk.

More importantly, call out his walk. I think we do a disservice to men as embroiled in sexist culture as we ourselves if we assume nefarious motives on them because they might inconsistently apply feminist theory to their personal lives. They might be just bumbling. I bumbled a lot with feminism, and I had better reason than most guys to get it.

Eventually, feminism 101 will become the norm, no longer a shining beacon of unique and brave understanding. In the meantime, keep calling lousy behavior and hypocrisy out when you see it. And get those stars outta your eyes.



olive says:

December 1, 2013 at 10:55 am

Rule #1 of self-defense club: if they EVER say that they "love women, and support women being able to do anything they want to do" they probably are a wolf in sheep's clothing. (if they're better than that, let their actions talk for a while, not their words.) Supporting women doing "anything they want to do" usually means "women doing what men often want to secure

male attention,” so that they can pretend it’s the woman’s choice. In my experience, men who love people, and support the right of everyone to do what they want—within sane reason—NEVER say they love women: they DO it, in the most subtle and complex of ways, starting with making sure that the women in their lives never feel like the second-class by modifying THEIR OWN actions to be respectful and honorable and treating humans like humans, not objects. Talk is cheap—and there’s tons of red flags when you learn to hear them.

GREAT, relevant article!



passer by says:

December 1, 2013 at 6:45 pm

Minichirops,

“unless women are expected to advocate that men are as good as women, expecting men to advocate the inverse is actually being unfair toward men.”

No it isn’t. Men, particularly white men attending college, as you’ve identified yourself as, don’t need women or people of color or...anyone, really, to be fair to them in order for their lives to be better in a broad way. You don’t need us to stand up for you. You don’t need us to break down barriers of the girls’ clubs in business, politics, or tech in order for you to have a chance in those fields without being constantly under attack. You don’t even need us to fight to give you a chance in fashion or cosmetics or... basically anything.

Hopefully, if you surround yourself with decent people, everyone will want good things for each other, but taking a step back, looking at social inequalities surrounding gender, and saying ‘well it’s only reasonable to ask for 1:1 reciprocation if I advocate for womens’ rights’ demonstrates a glaring lack of understanding about what those inequalities are and how they happened and are continually perpetrated.

So here’s a suggestion: Try not ‘merely’ being anything. Try whole-heartedly and attentively being decent to the people around you and listening. Don’t merely be chivalrous. Study, learn, and understand what these issues are and why they matter, and then you can actually care and be invested, and you’ll probably stop worrying about being unfairly mistaken as a fake-feminist.

Cold Drank

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