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Feminism Is a Lens, Not a Badge

By Marti Abernathey

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Abstract

In part two of her series, Marti Abernathey looks at identity versus analysis in feminism and Marxism, the pile-on against Niles, tone policing, and why the "uterus test" is a feeling dressed up as biology.

Article

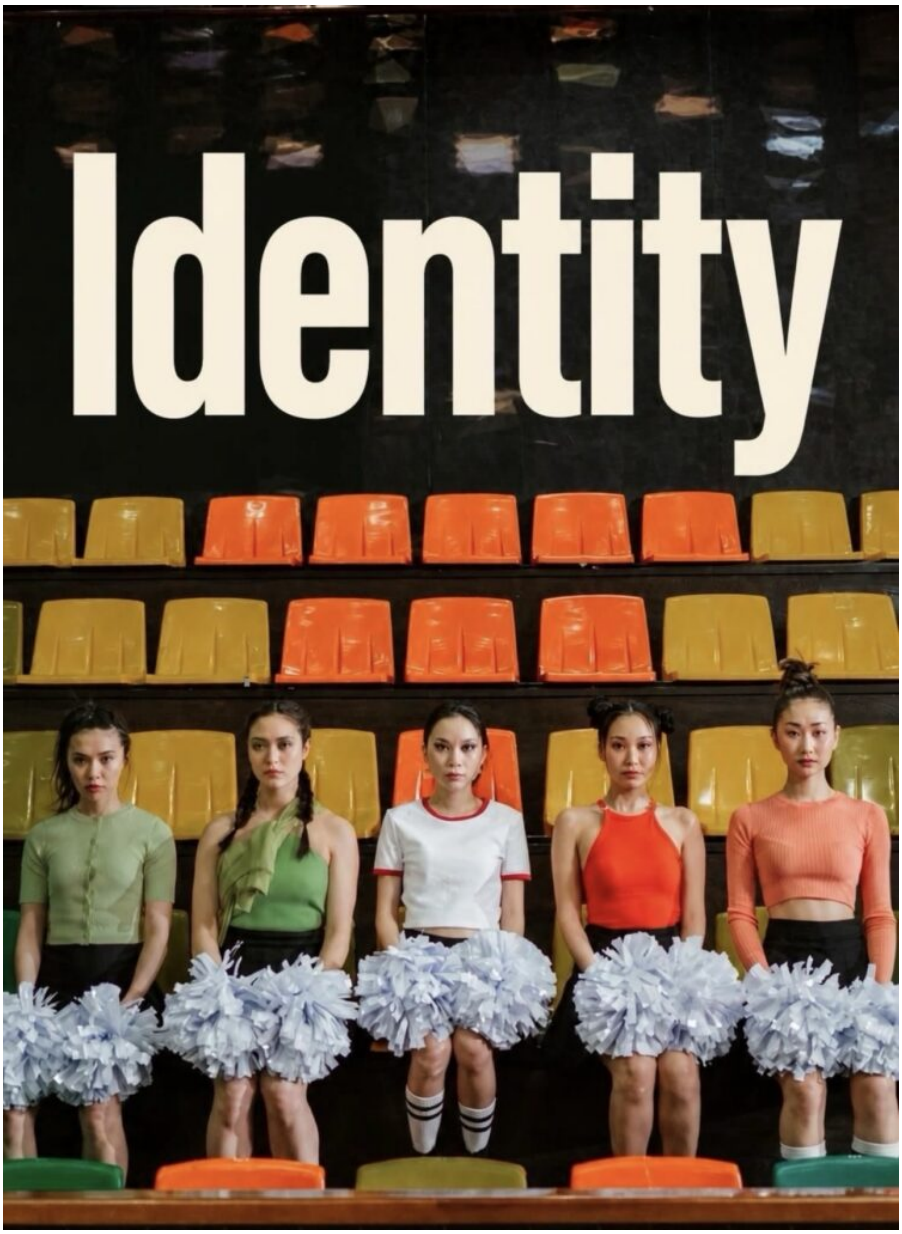


Figure 1. Screenshot

This is part two. Part one: TERFs Are Feminists. That's the Problem.

Feminism is supposed to be a lens for analyzing the world, and too many of us are wearing it as a badge that says we're the good people.

The other day I watched a creator make that exact case. Feminism is a field of study. It's theory. It's a lens. Being a woman gives you lived experience, and that experience matters, but it doesn't make you an automatic expert. Say only women can be feminists, or women are inherently better feminists than men, and you've walked straight into bioessentialism, and from there into trans exclusion.

I had my pom-poms out. I was ready to cheer.

Then, a few sentences later: “if you call yourself a feminist and you hate trans people, you’re not a feminist, you’re an idiot.”

My heart sank. Not because I have any sympathy for TERFs. Because the creator had just spent a minute arguing that feminism is a lens, then turned around and used it as a badge. If feminism is a lens, a TERF is someone using it badly, and you go after her analysis. If feminism is a badge for good people, you just take it away from her. You can’t have it both ways. The lens argument let men in, and the badge argument kicked TERFs out.

It’s Not Just Feminism

I see the same thing in Marxism. A lot of people who call themselves Marxists or communists aren’t using it as a lens to understand capital, labor and power. They’re using it as an identity, a marker that says they’re one of the good ones.

And once it’s a marker, it stops being about fixing anything. It turns into performance. Look at me. I’m a good person. That’s selfish at its core, because the point stops being the problem and starts being you.

That’s what so much of the discourse looks like now, on every side. TERFs insist they’re the good people protecting women. Trans allies insist they’re the good people protecting trans folks. Everybody’s arguing about who’s good. Almost nobody’s arguing about who has the better analysis. That doesn’t make both sides equally right. It means both are having the wrong fight.

Niles Said It Too

A few months ago, a nonbinary creator named Niles posted a video arguing that being born female, socialized as a girl and living as a woman doesn’t make you an authority on feminism. It gives you experience. It doesn’t give you the frameworks. Niles pointed to the work that does: Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality, bell hooks’s “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” Patricia Hill Collins’s matrix of domination, ecofeminism. Nobody got those by being born in a particular body. People built them by studying patterns across lives, economics, politics and culture.

Niles got lambasted for it.

One response is worth sitting with, because of how she argued. She didn’t say Niles was wrong. She said the idea of authority feels not liberating. She said she feels like if it came from a woman, it would be worded more like “we should be reading so that we know our stuff so we can be stronger together.”

That’s feelings answering analysis. And look at what the feeling actually is: a woman would have said it more gently. That’s benevolent sexism, the idea that women are naturally nurturing and soft and should sound that way. Niles called it out directly in the reply video, and they were right. She was policing tone with the very stereotype feminism exists to take apart.

Niles sounded tired, and I get why. Explaining the basics over and over to people who then critique your tone is exhausting.

You can disagree with Niles. You can think “you don’t have the range” was a rough way to put it. But if

your only answer is about how it made you feel, you haven't answered it.

The Uterus Test

Here's where it all comes together for me. Underneath the TERF argument there's always an undertone: trans women can't be women because they've never felt what it's like to have a uterus, or a period, or whatever the body requirement is this week.

That's feelings again. It makes womanhood a sensation you've had, not a position you've been put in. Feminist analysis has always been about how the world treats you: who gets harassed, who gets paid less, whose body gets regulated, whose voice gets dismissed. Trans women get all of that, plus transmisogyny on top.

And the uterus test fails on its own terms. Plenty of cis women never menstruate. Plenty have had hysterectomies. Every woman who lives long enough goes through menopause. Nobody says they've stopped being women. So the test was never really about bodies. It's a gatekeeping feeling dressed up as biology.

The best version of their argument says it isn't about feelings, it's material: abortion bans and pregnancy discrimination target bodies that can get pregnant. True, and feminism should fight every one of them. But trans men and nonbinary people get caught by those laws too, and women who can't get pregnant don't stop being women. Reproductive oppression is real. It just isn't the definition of a woman.

Which is the same failure as the badge. When feminism is an identity, you guard it with feelings. When it's a lens, you have to show your work.

Put Down the Pom-Poms

I'm going to keep doing what I've done for twenty years: arguing about analysis instead of about who gets to wear the jersey. That means calling TERFs feminists, bad ones, and taking their arguments apart. It means agreeing with Niles even when the comment section is on fire. And it means catching myself when I'm cheering because someone's on my team, not because they're right.

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