



gender
agenda

easter
2012



Cambridge Speaks Out

23% of women and 3% of men experience
sexual assault as an adult.

5% of women and 0.4% of men experience rape.

40% of adults who are raped tell no one about it.

Cambridge Speaks Out
is a space
where people can be heard.

(1) elly

breaking silence//breaching the peace

Trigger warning: This article involves discussion of DSK protest, including stories of rape survivors and references to police violence.

We fight for a small space – though it is also a big space, to hold all that it must – where our experiences are ours and are real.

As a rich and powerful man – flanked by eight bodyguards, protected by a steel fence and dozens of cops – is given an exalted platform to rehabilitate his image as an ‘economic expert’, whitewashing his abuse of women’s bodies, we create a makeshift platform from a megaphone and a wall. As students queue up to hear DSK speak, with their tickets, their two forms of ID, the body search, the surrendering of phones – looking smug because they are upholding the principle of free speech – we hear survivors of sexual assault speak out and break the silence that was imposed upon them. We create a space, there on the road, where women can speak and we will listen – they shake as they speak, and so do we.

Because it is our experience. We are here in solidarity with Diallo and DSK’s other victims, but these are also our experiences, our daily lives – the vast majority of women will have experienced sexual assault or harassment, and the threat is ever present. Survivors talk of silencing – the disbelieving of their experiences by police, friends, the legal system, psychologists. ‘Were you drunk, did you flirt, maybe you didn’t say no loudly enough, maybe you misunderstood him, he’s not very good at approaching women...’ They call this the second trauma for victims of sexual assault. In isolation we have all been silenced from speaking out against misogyny, rape culture or sexual assault, often rationally protecting ourselves from the harm of the retaliation visited upon us for speaking out.

We have seen this backlash against those who speak out in Cambridge, where women have been told not to protest, not to be ‘shrill’ and irrational, to untwist our knickers and stop ‘whining’, that being raped is akin to leaving your front door unlocked. The weapons that privilege uses to protect itself are petty but insidiously powerful. But this time we find courage from being together, we sustain one another, we create a vocabulary for our experiences, a discourse where we get to tell our own stories, and no one else can tell us what they mean. Outside the Union, we feel our hurt and our bravery as two sides of the same coin. We get angry.

(3) clare walker-gore

letter to the union

Dear Union Society Committee,

I am writing to you to resign my membership of the Cambridge Union Society and to demand a refund of my membership fee on the basis that I was mis-sold membership of the society. When I joined the society, it was on the understanding that it was committed to the promoting of free speech. That claim was made a mockery by the actions of the society over the last week, and is I believe now untenable and irrecoverable unless a full apology were to be made.

When I joined the union society in my first year, I was proud to think I was part of a society committed to debating the most challenging issues of our day, that brought such eminent speakers to Cambridge and enabled me to hear them. But on Friday evening, I found myself standing on the pavement outside the society building, on the other side of a metal barricade erected to protect the rapist inside, being stared at by lines of hired security guards and watched nervously by police, as woman after woman stepped forward to the megaphone to share her testimony, to speak out about her experience of sexual violence. From that makeshift platform, the speakers moved me beyond tears. I learnt more about the reality of sexual violence in our society, about rape culture and what it does to women's lives, than I would have thought possible in a single evening, and I learnt more about feminism than I have learnt from any book I have read or from any lecture I have attended.

But it is an outrage and a travesty that those women were speaking on the wrong side of those barricades, excluded, by force, from the chamber that is supposed to be a forum for real learning and real debate, while Strauss-Kahn was wined and dined, heard and applauded, privileged and protected. Later that evening, I watched some women's anger boil over as they tried to scale the barricades and force their way into the chamber to confront Strauss-Kahn, to make him hear what they had to say, and I watched them thrown to the floor by security guards, I watched them being grabbed, tackled, beaten. I watched all this knowing that the society of which I am a member had made this happen, had directly caused this brutality by inviting a rapist to speak in the chamber, then by refusing to allow these women a platform inside the union to express their feelings, and finally by hiring security whose sole priority was to ensure Strauss-Kahn was not embarrassed, at absolutely any cost. You put the personal pride of a serial rapist above the dignity and safety of your own members: you ignored the rape survivors speaking out in the cold so you could listen to a rapist in peace.

If a politician whose politics are controversial or even hateful is invited to speak at the union, then the rationale has always been that the politician will be questioned on

(5) anonymous

a problem of consent

Trigger warning: this article contains detailed discussion of the author's personal experience of rape.

Until two days ago, I never saw myself as a rape victim. I could – to trusted friends – acknowledge and occasionally talk about the sexual assault that happened when I was an adolescent, and I was happy to make jokes about “that music teacher who locked himself in a cupboard with me...” without looking properly at the consequences of either of those events. I felt as though those two occasions were the limits of my negative sexual experience.

And then on Friday I found myself talking to a close friend about various relationships, and I described my relationship with the man to whom I lost my virginity. (As an aside, I really don't like the terminology of 'losing one's virginity' – it puts a really uncomfortable value on the whole thing, for me.) Having tried to explain what it was like, I ground to a halt. My friend looked at me, and said: “That was rape.” Point blank. I'd never looked at it like that before. Or rather, I had not wanted to.

And I am troubled by it now; is it rape, for example, when you enter into a relationship with someone, knowing that they will have sex with you, and that your choice in the matter is almost nil? If you know that will happen, and yet you go ahead anyway, is that rape? I take sides against myself to say 'no, it can't be, and it isn't fair on X to call it rape'. I brought it on myself, is my main feeling.

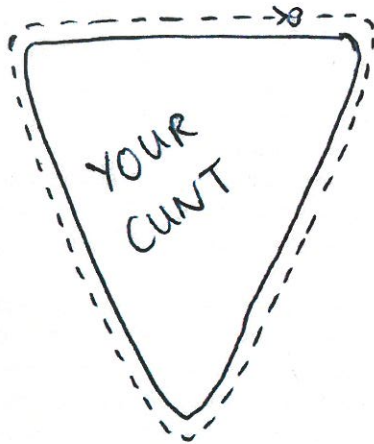
Two people very close to me are both victims of rape; probably if I asked, I'd know many more women who are. I've always therefore assumed that you know that it's rape; that there's something in your mind that tells you straight away that this is wrong, even if you can't react to it at the time. Maybe I did have that warning voice, without recognising it. Maybe I deliberately chose to ignore it.

Consent is often very difficult to negotiate. Many laws globally make reference to the importance of “free and active” consent. In my case, I don't know that any law would legally call it rape, although my consent was given more out of a sense of inevitability than because I actually wanted to be part of it. I remember, during the many times we had sex, staring at a point above his right shoulder and wishing he would just go away, wanting it to be over, and wondering how long it had to last. I felt more honour-bound to be part of the performance, than actively excited by it. I used to wonder what the point of sex was – I certainly didn't find it enjoyable, I didn't ever really want to be there, but I said yes, so in my mind that was consent.

(7) charlotte jeffreys

cunting

Fed up of bunting? Make your own Cunting! Simply draw a picture of your cunt in the triangle below, cut out, photocopy and attach to strig.



Cunting: For those who think allowing women to ascend the throne isn't quite enough to celebrate. Celebrate your cunt instead.

2. Forced Trivial Demands: creating unachievable and constantly changing standards in regards to food, dress, home, behavior, to the extent that the partner can never 'do anything right'. This is then used to blame her for outbreaks of violence, for example she did 'not make the tea right'. Repeated use of this kind of language leads women to believe that if they change their 'wrong' behavior they can stop the violence, but in reality there are no 'rules' because they are constantly changing to suit the perpetrator. I.e. a woman may wear a particular item of clothing that he likes one day but thinks is horrible the next, she never knows when her 'standards' may suddenly fall short.

3. Degradation and Humiliation may include: Name-calling, allowing no privacy, using children as a witness to violence, exposing secrets, embarrassing in public, highlighting flaws and weaknesses, encouraging children to disrespect their mother, making the partner beg for food, eat pet food or eat off floor, making the partner sleep or sit on floor, forced surgery, enslavement, forcing her to watch pornography, use of rape and other degrading sexual abuse and exploitation, etc.

4. Threats may include: threats to children's safety – to harm or take them away, to harm her family, to take money away, to take job away, blackmail, threats of deportation by taking VISA away, threats to report her to social services or to mental institutions, threats to take away access to friends and family, threats of rape, slavery, sexual abuse, physical harm and murder, threats to expose explicit photos/films to family/employers that may have been taken under duress.

5. Displays of Total Power: carrying out threats to isolate partner or withdraw financial means, using physical force against partner, sexual force such as rape, may also include smashing furniture or punching walls to demonstrate 'this is what I am capable of'.

6. Occasional Indulgences: part of a strategy to mess with partner's mind, may include occasional lavish purchases of gifts, taking partner out to dinner, using flattery and praise unexpectedly, saying 'I love you', indulging children, showing affection, warmth, weakness, agreeing to provide financial assistance for something, allowing family visits.

7. Exhaustion: Using 6 and others to make behavior extremely volatile so partner never knows how to act and is kept constantly on edge and in fear, constant pressure of demands, keep partner constantly pregnant or with small children so she is always tired, physically keeping her exhausted by shaking her awake in the middle of the night.

8. Distorted Perspectives: 6 can be used to present a very good 'front' in public and

(11) robyn

what does it mean to be a black woman?

The simple answer is I don't know. I am a woman of shared heritage, half scouse half Jamaican, quite the pedigree or so I've been told- cue the awkward wince. Anyone who has been referred to as 'racially ambiguous,' 'half caste' and in some cases 'diluted' will be familiar with the awkward wince. It's a poor show, but when you're the only 'non-white' in a room full of well meaning but slightly ignorant peers, an awkward wince is about all you can muster.

High profile people of shared ancestry abound; in fact one source indicated that it was the fastest growing ethnic group in Britain. Bob Marley, Malcolm X and president Obama are all of shared heritage and yet all people who are commonly referred to as black.

The issue is compounded when one thinks about how sensitive the topic of race remains. I have many a good intentioned (white) friend who insists that they are 'colour blind' or have never seen race as an issue. There are others who argue that race is no longer important in multi cultural Britain and there are others who would rather make cracks about rape than sit and discuss the role of race in the sexualisation of black women.

Such arguments however tend to end the discussion where it started and minimise the issue of race in our society. Indeed, flicking through the various media outlets, one can see the issue of race is still well and truly with us. Concerns aired by Sol Campbell about black England supporters going to the Ukraine has been widely criticised, the case of prostitution and grooming of under-aged girls in Yorkshire by a group of Asian men, and the mere fact that descriptions of Diallo frequently made reference to her immigrant status and the unreliability of her character all bear witness. In March the recording of police racial abuse by a 21 year old in East Londoner made the Guardian. The fact that the Crown Prosecution Service decided not to prosecute the officers came as no surprise, nor did the comments made in the recording, but it did provide food for thought. In that particular recording the police officer made the remark 'the problem with you is that you'll always be a nigger.'

Race and womanhood have always coexisted in my experiences and identity. My first memories of 'difference' were when I came home from school in year two. I sat with my sister at the table and looked at my beans on toast, thwarted. "We can't eat it" (I often spoke for my younger sister, fortunately I was always able to pre-empt her requests, or so I conveyed to our mum). "Why" asked my mum. I explained that the

essentialism: the essentials

Any time gender and sex are discussed between feminists, especially between feminists of different persuasions, sooner or later somebody's going to say "essentialist". It often comes from people on multiple 'sides' of an argument; somebody walking into the debate for the first time could be forgiven for thinking that "essentialist" was a synonym for "self-evidently bad".

An essentialist view of a thing is that there are specific attributes which are inseparable from that thing. In feminism, it's usually used to say that someone – always the other person! – considers some things to be universal to women (and/or men), and is wrong to do so.

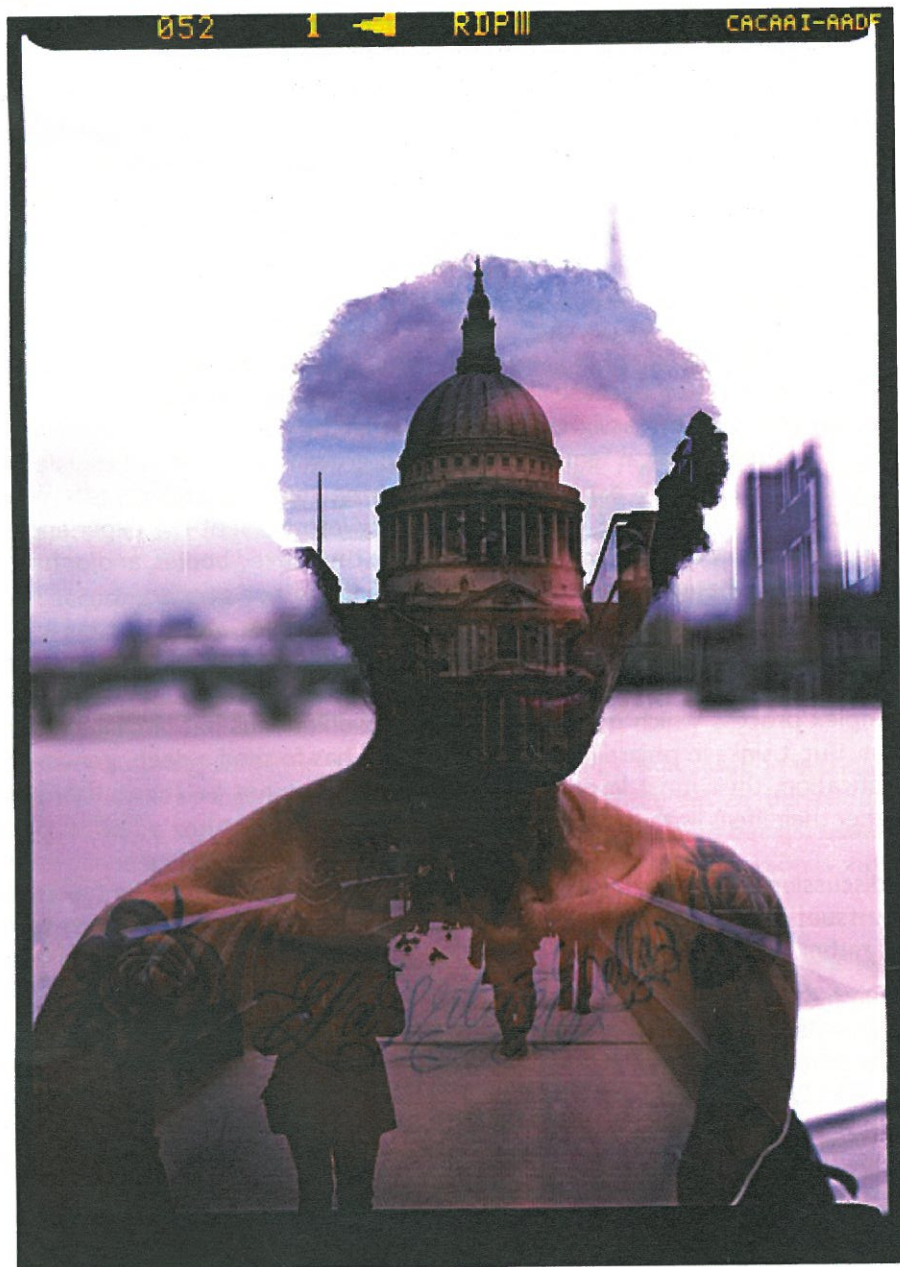
But essentialism is a word with several meanings and I wonder if our feminist conversations could be improved if we talked it through a little more deeply. At its simplest, it can be broken down into sex and gender essentialism:

When accusing somebody of sex essentialism, what's commonly meant is that they seem to be considering, for example, a female-sexed body essential to 'womanhood', i.e. that only someone with a vagina, ovaries, womb etc. 'counts' as a woman. This accusation is most commonly levelled at radical feminists.

And when accusing someone of gender essentialism, the accusation is usually that they consider a female gender, composed of some set of behaviours, traits etc., to be some essential quality which resides in human beings, usually in accordance with but sometimes independent of sex. This accusation is most commonly made by radical feminists.

Firstly, I'd like to indicate some common ground (and also a common enemy), which is that patriarchy is both sex- and gender-essentialist. The patriarchal view of women is that our sex defines us as women, which implies our gender, which is expressed through such outlets as our enduring desire to perform emotional care work for men, a natural enthusiasm to appear in pornography and I guess our liking pink or something. Even though that used to be a colour for boys. Whatever.

(15) nick morris
la vita è bella



(17) ruth graham

street harrassment: fighting back

Once upon a time, I was on a train. I was chatting to a very good friend on my mobile for half an hour (yes, I'm one of those annoying phone-on-train 'oh has it cut out again?' people) until my phone died. I'd finished my book. Boredom ensued. I decide to go on a saunter down the train in search of some coffee. As I went through the carriages, on my saunter, I came across a fairly packed carriage, carrying some football fans. As I walked past the throng, I heard someone shout something after me: 'lift up your skirt a bit love, let us see some gange!' Being a good feminist, and generally protected by a bubble of reasonable, non-violent people, I turned around, and with my best scowl (and best Mancunian accent), asked, 'who said that?'

Honestly, I can barely remember the details of what followed anymore – it's too long ago and anger/upset erases the memory. Check the court transcript if you're curious (I'm guessing it's public). Anyway, what got shouted back was seriously offensive, and pretty threatening. Perhaps somewhat naively, I politely informed them that this was unacceptable, and that I was going to report them. I turned and stomped down the train passage way (full of silent passengers), and by the time I'd got to the other end of the carriage, I saw that some men had sprung out of their seats, and were following me down the carriage.

Let's pause for a minute. Now the thing is, mostly when the topic of sexual harassment comes up, two ideas always seem to rear their ugly heads. To me, those seem to be a) surely it's just a compliment, as it's usually directed at people who dress 'sexily'? And b) responding will only escalate the situation though, won't it? All I can say is that you don't need to take anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or intimidated as a compliment. It's just harassment. And verbal abuse (including sexual comments), and physical intimidation (including following someone) are utterly wrong, and they should be treated as crimes. If in doubt, you can always call the police! You're not wasting their time, you're doing society a massive favour by calling out those who intimidate and harass. You may just be the thing that stops them.

So intermission aside, I was feeling full of shame (god, is my skirt too short?! Why was I so foolhardy? Should've just kept walking!) and half running down this train carriage, until I got to a door at the end of the train, where the women with the food trolley was. I was pretty distressed, so we went into a little room, and I explained the situation. She was not keen on reporting it to anyone, even though

(19) swyn

a feminist and the nice guys in her life

I've bemoaned the decentering of women's issues in favour of the old 'but what about the men?' debate quite recently, so this article may seem a little strange. Bear with me; I'm definitely aiming to centre women's experiences. More specifically, I'm offering my own experience, as a woman, and wondering whether my rationalisation of it resonates for others. I make no claim that my experience is universal, though, anecdotally speaking, it seems to be common.

In my daily life, I don't meet many people who will admit to being anti-feminist. 23 years in, I have (more or less) successfully pruned my social tree down to a verdant set of variously progressive political branches. However, the odd cuckoo is still to be found nesting. First, there is the common or garden 'I'm not a feminist but...', then there is the fairweather 'I'm a feminist man stop oppressing me by saying I can't direct feminist discourse because if I'm not allowed to maintain my traditional "active" role I'm not going to play any more', and finally, the infestitious 'Nice Guy'.

A typical example; I meet a man who reads the copy of Gender Agenda I leave lying around and seems to believe that women are fully human i.e. not just designed to fulfil man-enabling roles such as housework, child rearing, or providing sexual gratification. He is pleasant, we become close. A term down the line, he is still ostensibly pleasant, but cracks are beginning to show: he makes 'thoughtless' jokes, making comments like 'that bitch can ride a pole' on a music video. I didn't get it either, but I think the punchline was that I am a feminist and therefore misogyny in my presence is funny.

This is still not a man who would proclaim his entitlement to a female 'helpmeet'; you could have a liveable relationship with him. But there is obviously something about relating with a self-proclaimed feminist woman which has brought out a deep insecurity in him, manifest in his desire to make feminism a joke or little idiosyncrasy. This happens to me a lot: I obviously never embark on relationships with insecure, anti-feminist men if I know that's what they are. Yet I end up leaving several relationships with insecure, anti-feminist men. And today I had an epiphany as to why:

(21) anonymous

haiku

playful patriarch
public mark of ownership
a slap on her bum

(23) lis

hate men?

i think more of them than you do

Trigger Warning: This article contains non-specific references to rape and abuse.

Type 'why do feminists' into Google and the first suggestion you get is, '... hate men'. I'm a radical feminist, which means I probably qualify for result number four on Google's auto-suggest, '... hate men so much'. Several of my friends would probably agree. The weird thing, though, is that it seems I have a far higher opinion of men than they do.

Not individual men, particularly. As a separatist in principle, few of my friends are men – not because I hate them, just because I find male privilege draining on an interpersonal level. And not men as a class, because when you take the aggregate of men's actions, what you get makes up a significant chunk of patriarchy, and I'm not such a fan of that either.

But in terms of men's essential nature, their capabilities and their potential, my estimation is way up there.

I don't think that men rape and abuse women because they're animals, that "boys will be boys". I think that people rape and abuse people because our culture encourages boundary violation and it is enabled by systems of power. In many cases where power dynamics are in play, there are horrific rates of rape and abuse over those dynamics.

So, men. Patriarchy is one hell of a system of power, and it's one over which unusually many relationships take place. We also live in a rape culture in which rape and abuse are normalised and enabled almost regardless of the context in which they take place. Romance and pick-up paradigms are rape culture instruction manuals, and "nice guy" and "friendzone" memes are steeped in entitlement. Cultural masculinity (not men, but what men are taught) is practically a celebration of boundary violation and the objectification of women, and cultural femininity is an education in indirect or non-assertion of boundaries.

(25) sarra

narrative and silencing

This is about being backed into a corner. This is about not having a voice, even when you can speak. This is about doubting that patriarchal power exists, even when you can see it everywhere.

I. Two people were photographed together for the website Humans of New York: one a black woman, the other a white Orthodox Jewish man. Along with the image, the photographer published, with permission, the woman's experience in front of the lens. Her co-subject had been offering her money to go out with him; first \$500, then \$1000. She was shaken. I can't describe the scale of the backlash to the publication of her testimony; you can read it for yourself. She was positioned against a group which had the power even to arbitrarily declare how do we know she's even telling the truth?

<http://www.stopstreetharassment.org/2012/05/respectblackwomen/>

II. When I shared the article I got a response straight away from S, who when I knocked on her door to borrow the book she'd just recommended read me the following from it:

'In Simone de Beauvoir's *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* [...] she recounts a philosophical skirmish with her friend and fellow student Jean-Paul... There is real pathos in the fact that even the mature de Beauvoir writes in apparent innocence of the wrongfulness of Sartre's undermining treatment of her, not to mention its tiresome bullshitness, and she recounts the experience thus:

Day after day, and all day long I measured myself against Sartre, and in our discussions I was simply not in his class. One morning in the Luxembourg Gardens, near the Medici fountain, I outlined for him the pluralist morality which I had fashioned to justify the people I liked but did not wish to resemble: he ripped it to shreds. I was attached to it, because it allowed me to take my heart as the arbiter of good and evil; I struggled with him for three hours. In the end I had to admit I was beaten; besides, I had realized, in the course of our discussion, that many of my opinions were based only on prejudice, bad faith or thoughtlessness, that my reasoning was shaky and my ideas confused. 'I'm no longer sure what I think, or even if I think at all,' I noted, completely thrown.'

I wanted to reach back in time and tell Simone that there's a word for this: gaslighting.

Gaslighting is a term that is often applied to deliberate attempts to make a victim doubt their perceptions, as in the Bergman film from which it takes its name. It can also, and much more commonly, describe the same effect achieved unintentionally, usually as the result of a gross power imbalance. See: <http://snipurl.com/current-conscience-gaslighting>. Under attack by Sartre, with the entire weight of male philosophical tradition and male power behind him, Simone doubts not just the thesis she was defending, but her entire mode of thinking and the integrity of her self.

(25) faith taylor

liberal academy annihilated theory

Trigger Warning:

This piece references rape. Although it is in the context of someone else talking about rape, it could still be distressing to people.

liberal flirted with the dykes and ditched them for a white wedding.
liberal bled the radiators and we basked in the warmth of self-importance, entitlement,
that 'of course I can comment' compulsion that
only we demi-gods know.
academy was a gauze – liberal
academy annihilated theory
through a painfully unintelligent reappraisal of theory.
some – how – this – doesn't – quite – bolster – my – privilege
—————> i guess i'll demolish it
how can i CARVE a CAREER out of this shit?
liberal academy announces that nothing is real, it's all in your head, the end is nigh;
he believes in nothing,
but a reconstruction of the status quo -
do not object because you do not exist -
how dare you feel oppressed by my privilege, how fucking dare you.

I. YOU ARE KNOWN TO BE SHOUTER.
I KNOW YOU ARE SHOUTER.
YOU CAN'T SHOUT DOWN RAPE.
NOT ALL RAPISTS ARE BAD.
SHUT UP YOU FUCKING BITCH.
YOU STUPID FUCKING BITCH.
WHEN YOU SHOUTED LIKE THAT YOU DIDN'T GET ANYWHERE
YOU (WILL) LET EVERYBODY DOWN, ESPECIALLY YOURSELF -
BITCH.

II. IF THE LAW DOESN'T NEUTRALISE GENDER IT IS TRANSPHOBIC.
YOU ARE TRANSPHOBIC BECAUSE YOU SAY YOU HAVE BEEN RAPED.
YOU ARE TRANSPHOBIC BECAUSE YOU SAY YOU HAVE BEEN RAPED AND WERE
TRIED AS A WOMAN WHO HAD BEEN RAPED BY A MAN.
HAVEN'T YOU HEARD OF DECONSTRUCTION.
HAVEN'T YOU HEARD OF DERRIDA.