

“I’m So Triggered”

The cultural co-option of PTSD



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Illustration by Christina Yoseph

In 2016, the TriggeredFeminist meme went viral. The woman at its centre, videoed speaking with Trump supporters about the scale of gendered sexual violence in the US, was branded an angry feminist. The clip of her is barely 30 seconds long, but it catalyzed something that had already begun. Almost immediately, distinct ways to describe her emerged. She was no longer just an angry feminist, she was possessed by the ghost of social justice.

She was so *triggered*.

Mememes flooded 4chan, reddit and YouTube, shared by InfoWars, Pewdiepie, and Alex Jones. **Triggered** became such a powerful symbol in white supremacist factions that Donald Trump Jr. capitalized on the tsunami. Promoting his book, *Triggered: How the Left Thrives on Hate and Wants to Silence Us*, he launched triggerlib.com, where visitors can send famous liberals, highlighted in a curated list that features Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Hillary Clinton, a copy via Amazon.

Because, of course, *they're all so triggered*.



Dave Rubin ✓ @RubinReport · Apr 30, 2019

I've **triggered** a socialist. Do I get a cookie?



sonofvbeach @SonofVBeach · Apr 30, 2019

Uhhhhhhhh. The rule of law is not abdicated under socialism you fucktard. [twitter.com/RubinReport/st...](https://twitter.com/RubinReport/status/1126444444)

331

179

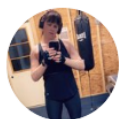
2.4K



mysterioususer233 @gupfan1 · Feb 7

So let me get this straight. You think an anime about high school girls in a tankery class is degrading to women? I hope you are joking.

[#triggeredfeminist](#) [#girlsundpanzer](#)



It's Liz, bitch @itsliz_bitch · Apr 30, 2019

Might fuck around and become a **feminist**. That way I can get angry and **triggered** every time I see a man.

3

7

23



There's so much noise and so many questions: what does it mean to be a triggered feminist? What happens when you "trigger a liberal"? What do young people mean when they post online anecdotes about being triggered?



Peter Lloyd ✓
@Suffragentleman

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Author of Stand By Your Manhood. Triggered a feminist with "sticks & stones". Classical liberal. Neither left nor right. Liverpudlian. Opinions are spot-on.



shakirastuff @shakirastuff_ · 13h

Shakira and J Lo really triggered the Tr*mp supporters. You love to see it.



The Hill @thehill · 17h

"God forbid we expected to watch football and a quick concert but instead had our eyes molested," one viewer from Tennessee wrote in a complaint. hill.cm/az8ADft



6

33



Can we pin down triggered's current meaning in our rapid, ever-evolving discourse?



lil Eba @Biidemiii · May 21, 2019

I corrected my daddy's pronunciation of Louis Vuitton and he goes "last last you cannot afford it!" I AM **TRIGGERED**

90

2K

3.4K



triggered has undergone a series of public online mutations and is now a synonym for being upset or annoyed, or a crude stand-in to describe liberals and feminists. Language can seem brittle when it morphs at such speed, making it difficult to truly know how and why it happened. Nevertheless we must try. So, much like triggers themselves, let's force ourselves backwards. To a place we feel secure in its meaning. Trauma.

What does it mean to be a triggered feminist?

Being triggered is like having an alarm go off in your body. There are different levels to how a trigger feels but, generally, experiencing something that is triggering is like being wound up like a wheellock and culminates in a distinct moment; being triggered. The wind is released and goes off like a gun. In that moment the person who has been triggered is transported back to a moment of trauma. For survivors of sexual violence this is back to a moment of abuse.

We know that sexual violence is about power. As language evolves it mirrors power dynamics that play out in everyday lives. While it is difficult to know where any shift truly comes from, what we do know is that they are normal, routine, and often intrinsically connected to power. Linguistic evolutions are therefore essential to analyze, for they tell us something about the way that power operates in the world.

It is important to understand that a key part of the feminist movement has been the idea that women **don't** have power; simply because they are women living in a patriarchal system. The aim has been to **gain** power. This approach originates from the birth of 1970s feminist activism, when sexual violence was placed at the heart of the movement. Activists argued that sexual violence and the myths that surround it exist everywhere, that any woman can become a victim of sexual violence, and that a key way to prevent violence was through breaking silence. The idea that breaking silence will end violence and shift power dynamics is so deeply woven into the movement that very few question the purpose of speaking out at all.



We are now 50 years on and it remains vital to question and examine how movements and their aims have morphed over time, especially when the demands revolve around power and visibility; and more significantly when they engage with systems of oppression. There is consequently an important conversation to be had around what framings of universal victimhood and politicization of collective pain and trauma have done, and more importantly what and who they have visibilized and invisibilized.

An understanding of what it is to be triggered has always been deeply embedded in sexual violence support and grassroots feminist communities — and has been since well before the concept of triggering was incorporated into psychological studies and trauma support groups in the 1980s. Nevertheless, as certain feminists fought to be included and heard in mainstream discourse there has been an unequivocal dilution of the term. Through widespread usage ‘triggered’ became ubiquitous. Studies show us that, arguably as a result of feminism, the vast percentage of people claim to understand the impacts and effects of sexual violence; but we have to question whether people truly understand what it means to be triggered, or if they simply see it as a synonym for upset.



Anni Marttinen @animarttinen · Oct 1, 2019

#triggeredfeminist : Triggered = when someone gets offended or their feelings hurt, feminist = a person who supports socioeconomical and political equality of the sexes.



Feminists have interacted with critique, conflict and portrayed powerlessness in complicated ways. This, in turn, has had a huge impact on mainstream trauma discourse and the linguistic shifts around *triggered*. As Alison Phipps notes, “the cultural power of mainstream feminism is linked to the cultural power of white tears...mainstream feminist activism against sexual violence is shaped by the woundedness of white bourgeois femininity”. Arguably, mainstream feminists — the majority of whom are white, cis and able-bodied — have more power than they profess; an idea the anti-governance feminist academic Janet Halley speaks to in stating that feminism “wages power without owning it”.

There is no better place to see the impacts of this than online. As certain types of feminists were using, and overusing, triggered and trigger warnings with little reflection, parts of academia were releasing statements declaring that the proliferation of trigger warnings delivers fatal blows to free speech. These academics, some of whom are entangled in a murky, insidious web with the self-proclaimed adversaries of ‘social justice warriors’ and the far right, argue that the language of triggers acts as a refusal to engage with divergent positions. They believe this is an “anti-intellectual” means of resisting knowledge-based enquiry and confrontation which has undoubtedly led to the coddling of young minds.



Those who have critiqued the rise of ‘political correctness’ and trigger warnings have therefore professed that the “thin argument ‘I am offended’ becomes an unbeatable trump card,” impossible to argue against because to do so challenges someone’s emotional state or identity. There is an interesting observation to make in that nowhere in these circles does there appear to be an in-depth discussion of trauma or ableism, what constitutes harm, and who gets to decide these definitions. There are parallels here between the so-called “defenders of intellectual

freedom” and the feminists who pushed forth the widespread usage of the word triggered without pausing for thought. Nuanced subjects have become reduced to buzzwords and catchphrases. There is little investment in actualizing them in practice; supporting people do the work to understand why we cannot truly have ‘safe’ spaces, to understand trauma and triggers, and supporting those who experience them. We are increasingly living in an age of big concepts, minimal substance and harmful hyperbole.

Feminists and the far-right, groups who would grimace at being thrown together, are both deeply invested in gaining power. From both, there is a generalized resistance at interrogating and reflecting on the power they individually and collectively hold. In battles that exist largely online, language is often the weapon of choice. Yet the language of social justice has been co-opted and hurled around with frightening force by all. We have become adept at effectively weakening arguments by repurposing the language underpinning it, diluting it until its original meaning becomes obsolete.



H. @hannyyjayy · Apr 30, 2019

I get so **triggered** when people don't like spicy food 😂😂😂



al @local_celeb · Aug 31, 2019

just got soooo **triggered** by bachelor in paradise



Triggered’s status as a fully-fledged meme has been solidified via the social media accounts of young people. What was once the domain of feminists and far-right nationalists is now shared property with millennials and Gen Z-ers. Triggered is now shorthand to explain anything from seeing a picture of your celebrity crush to someone queue-jumping at Starbucks. **Triggered** has become a potent symbol for how nuance and reflection are lost when language, at the peak of hyper-capitalism, the monetization of the self and White Feminism™, is warping at a dizzying pace to accommodate the race to find new ways of saying things, to garner more clicks, likes, engagement, social capital. The responsibility for what has happened to triggered must be shared; the fault does not

lie with any one group. This evolution may be a purposeful one, designed to weaken movements that interrogate and challenge power. It may be a token of the memeification of online culture that is eroding our collective capacity for nuance, complexity, and empathy. It may be all of these things.

Regardless of who is to blame — we must all hold that the dilution of *triggered* has reduced the experiences of trauma survivors to overreaction, offence, and fragility. People who are likely to be triggered are those who experience PTSD; sexual violence survivors, survivors of disasters, bereaved people, people who have served in the military, those who have experienced physical violence, neglect, emotional abuse. This is not an exhaustive list but there is a cruel irony in the incessant belittling of the experiences of PTSD survivors by those who espouse nationalism and yet refuse to acknowledge the harm endured, and perpetrated, by those in the armed forces.

How we hold such difficult contradictions, practicing empathy for those who have caused indescribable hurt and refuse to see our pain in turn, is central to how we can hope to imagine any other type of future. How do we find commonalities between us, when we are so committed to the idea that there aren't any?

When we first started this article, we hoped we could locate a different kind of language to help us through these times. A new word that could capture all of the complexity and nuance of what it means to be triggered. But it isn't about new words or refashioning existing ones. Language is always corruptible. Instead it is about how we **engage**. Sometimes we have to look outward to look inward. What we see in other movements may reflect ugly truths of our own. It can be a long and painful reckoning. PTSD and the experience of being triggered is not limited to those of us on the left. We can never dismantle white supremacist cis-hetro-patriarchy without understanding how it works, its tactics, its drivers, the things that fuel its fire. We can never dismantle it without knowing how it finds its way into our own movements, jeopardizing our concepts of safety and harm. We can never dismantle it without dialogue. We are not perfect, we are not infallible. Most of us are absolutely not triggered when we say we are. But we can try to do better. We must lean in and use the tools available to us to bring back nuance and complexity, care and empathy. We can believe in each other's ability to see the other, even when it hurts to look.
