Conceal and Carry: Communicating about Trauma, Triggers, and Second Assaults in the Classroom

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CONCEAL AND CARRY: COMMUNICATING ABOUT TRAUMA, TRIGGERS, AND SECOND ASSAULTS IN THE CLASSROOM

by

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A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

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Under the Supervision of Professor Dawn O. Braithwaite

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Challenging the predominance of rape culture within academia, this dissertation focuses on the intersection of academic conversations regarding the inclusion of trigger warnings. This project examines the academic trigger warning debate from its inception in January 2014 through its peak in May 2015. I argue that the implementation of trigger warnings serves as a visible adaptation within pedagogy to respond to the role trauma from sexual assaults may influence the classroom. To achieve this, I offer a careful examination of the trigger warning debate informed by an approach that puts Kenneth Burke’s indexing in conversation with Michael McGee’s ideographic analysis. This theoretical lens allows me to adopt a stance rooted within Deanna Fassett and John T. Warren’s critical communication pedagogy.

Throughout the dissertation, I argue that depictions of graphic sexual violence in the classroom can cause both educators and students to experience a “second assault.” “Second assaults” occur when exposure to classroom content results in triggering a PTSD response within the individual. The project culminates with a guide of pedagogical options aimed at rupturing the presence of rape culture, while allowing for discussion of sexual violence within the classroom. Finally, I address the (im)possible articulations of this study for future research.
DEDICATION

Dr. Carly S. Woods,

I will be forever grateful for your guidance throughout this healing journey.

It has taken me a decade to make this argument,

thank you for helping me turn trauma into pedagogy and advocacy.

I am blessed to have you as a mentor.
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CHAPTER ONE

The Scope of the Trigger Warning Debate

2013 was “the year of trigger warnings,” according to Slate Magazine. Though the term dates back to the early twentieth century, “trigger warnings” gained traction within online feminist communities in the 1990s. Trigger warnings are disclaimers or forewarnings that alert audiences that content contains the potential for negative affective responses. Often, they are used before exposing audiences to graphic or traumatic material, such as depictions of sexual violence. Trigger warnings, I argue, are a visible marker of the need for a corrective response to a pervasive rape culture.


5 Rape culture develops out of cultural norms that include sexism, social disciplining, social conditioning (victim blaming, sexual education, violence apathy), and commodifying the body. My position is that culturally, sex is viewed as a product a person “gets” from another. This mentality positions “getting sex” as an end game that is more important than getting consent. For further reading on rape culture, see Jessica Valenti, “America's Rape Problem: We Refuse to Admit That There Is One,” The Nation, January 4, 2013, accessed May 5, 2014, http://www.thenation.com/blog/172024/americas-rape-problem-we-refuse-admit-
survivors are sometimes made visible when they are triggered to recall the trauma of assault. Communicating trauma is complicated by a tension between remembering and forgetting. Remembering trauma can create a sense of catharsis; however, forgetting or ignoring trauma is a natural survival response as individuals try to guard against the risk of flashbacks.\(^6\)

What began as a way for feminist bloggers to alert readers that a text contained trauma narratives has spun into a public debate about whether trigger warnings should spread into the academy.\(^7\) This debate coincided with a larger move to address sexual assault on college campuses – a move that took center stage on April 27, 2014 as President Obama revealed the first White House task force created to address Title IX violations regarding reporting sexual violence.\(^8\) The development of the task force was

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motivated by a desire to encourage community dialogues about how Americans should respond to sexual violence. Media attention brought increased visibility to the topic. It is important to actively engage the issue to transform that visibility into social change.

The trauma of sexual assault requires a timely intervention. There is a social kairos for action on this issue. The creation of Obama’s task force followed shortly after what one commentator labeled “Rape Culture’s Abu Ghraib” moment: when the sexual assault of a young girl in Steubenville, Ohio was captured and shared on Twitter and Instagram. While this instantiation of rape culture was profoundly mediated and hyper-public, it is not an isolated incident. A host of other notable instances keep discussion of rape culture in the public headlines, including the controversy surrounding Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines;” the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)’s


appeal to the White House to avoid using the term “rape culture;” the popularization of the slang term “rapey;” the “Jada pose” meme, the adoption and use of #metoo, the unification of Hollywood behind #TimesUp, and what is being labeled as “the Weinstein Effect.” At question in this debate is who bears the responsibility for assault: the perpetrator, the community, or those who have been marked by sexual violence.

Much like a cult relies on groupthink to diminish questioning and resistance, rape culture is enabled by social conditioning that blames the victim instead of society or the perpetrator.

While rape culture needs to be probed from multiple angles, I focus on the discourse surrounding trigger warnings in a particular educational setting: classrooms on college campuses. Unlike other exemplars of rape culture, this issue has remained a part of mainstream discussion since 2013. The longevity of this discussion has enabled the

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15 Amber Joy Powell, “Best of 2017: Revisiting Rape Culture as Survivors Say, ‘Me Too’,” *The Society Pages*, December 19, 2017, accessed February 16, 2018, https://thesocietypages.org/trot/2017/12/19/revisiting-rape-culture-as-survivors-say-me-tool. #metoo was first introduced by Tarana Burke in 2007; however, the movement did not regain public traction until September 2017 when Alyssa Milano revived the campaign. #metoo was meant to showcase the prevalence of sexual violence and sexual harassment, by asking survivors to share #metoo on social media.


development of nuanced positions on the issue. More importantly, a research focus on the college classroom envelops a discussion of both sexual assault and trigger warnings. Pedagogically, trigger warnings serve as a method of visibly addressing rape culture within the classroom. For example, a law instructor might issue a trigger warning before playing audio files of a sexual assault victim’s testimony in class. Literature instructors could choose to warn their students of a graphic passage in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Instructors seeking to teach about a range of gender issues, from mediated misogyny to global sex trafficking, could use trigger warnings before showing documentary films such as *Dreamworlds* or *Half the Sky* in class. Those opposed to the practice often note that trigger warnings are a slippery slope; the argument can be made that they should be used for almost any kind of intense discussion in the classroom. Although they can and have been used for a variety of other issues, the scope of this project is to examine trigger warnings in which instructors seek to not just to minimize discomfort, but to guard against PTSD trauma in the classroom. The combination of trigger warnings in the classroom and directed discussion about sexual assault on college campuses creates the conditions of possibility in which individuals (students and educators) may develop an ample vocabulary to extend advocacy beyond the classroom.

Burke explains in *Grammar of Motives* that vocabulary is developed based on social needs. Such vocabulary must be “supple and complex enough to be representative of the subject matter it is designed to calculate. It must have scope. Yet it must also possess simplicity, in that it is broadly a reduction of the subject matter.”¹⁸ In this case, trigger warnings provide a vocabulary for accounting for sexual violence within the

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academy. Thus, tracking trigger warnings, as they have entered the cultural lexicon and are being discussed within the academy, serves as a viable cross-section to better understand and examine rape culture.

I intend to start a dialogue about the silence that surrounds what I call “second assaults,” or trauma-triggering situations that cause affective reactions or flashbacks within individuals. This is especially the case with captive audiences, where an individual’s attendance is required. Addressing trigger warnings from a communication perspective is vital as the discipline of communication studies often positions public speaking within an audience-centered model. I maintain that if a rhetor is to stay true to a rhetorical sensitivity that values and affirms students within the classroom, trigger warnings are an important vessel in maintaining that commitment. An audience-centered perspective in the classroom values the emotional and mental well-being of students and must not dismiss trigger warnings as a game of semantics. As Aaron Hess notes, rhetorical speech acts intrinsically build “worlds through the interpretive frame of the speaker as he or she attempts to persuade or identify with an audience.” This dissertation highlights the importance and vitality of language and the reality that our language choices may produce emotionally detrimental outcomes. Utilizing trigger warnings is vital if we wish to continue pursuing a path of rhetorical sensitivity in the discipline. I seek to extend how we talk about ethics in regard to an audience’s emotional well-being and enlarge the circumference of how one may conceptualize the captive

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In order to accomplish this, this chapter begins by outlining the trigger warning debate in the academy. I then move on to establish why a communication perspective can lend a unique vantage point regarding this public controversy. Finally, I offer a preview of the upcoming chapters.

1.2 Academic Trigger Warning Debate

As the new semester began in Spring 2014, more and more students across the nation requested the inclusion of trigger warnings in the classroom. This, in turn, sparked a larger public debate in which students, academics, media commentators, and public intellectuals weighed in on the merits of trigger warnings. By tracking this debate at its peak between January 2014 and May 2015, I found the two sides tend to reflect two disparate concerns. Advocates of academic freedom are concerned about the stultifying effects of trigger warnings on free speech and pedagogy. Advocates for trigger warnings aim to create safe spaces for survivors of sexual assault and raise awareness of the crisis. Each side utilizes specific social values to garner support for their case. In the

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21 Ethics has been a concern for the communication discipline since Aristotle. When referring to rhetorical ethics, my understanding of this term is influenced by a multitude of scholarship done within communication. This scholarship includes Wayne Brockriede, Thomas Olbricht, Roderick Hart, Sonya Foss and Cindy Griffin to name a few. I view rhetorical ethics as creating a space of mutual respect and safeguarding the protection of a captive audience.

22 See Jenny Jarvie, “Trigger Happy,” for further discussion on the student movement. Initially, students requesting the use of trigger warnings included: Oberlin College, University of California- Santa Barbara, and Scripps College.

23 Although trigger warnings may be used to address a whole host of traumatic issues, for the purposes of this project, I am specifically looking to trigger warnings concerning sexual violence. This reduction in scope is motivated by an interest in investigating the dual discourses within the academy which both express the need to appropriately address sexual assault and the yet question the utility of trigger warnings. Additionally, multiple authors have noted the distinction between trigger warnings and content notes, cautioning against conflating the two terms. Content notes provide additional information regarding themes or topics within a text. Content notes have been utilized in both television and film to support the rating system. For example, if a student requested that a teacher identify material depicting racism, a content warning could be used. Alternatively, trigger warnings operate as a specific content note to mark content
broadest sense, academic freedom advocates seek to maintain choice and free will, while protectors of safe spaces petition for wellbeing and safety. To better understand the debate, I outline the chosen value structure of each side, starting with academic freedom and then moving to safe space advocates.

The academic freedom camp believes that trigger warnings do not belong in academic spaces because the warning will negatively impact students’ learning experience. This side contends that one purpose of education is to make students aware of unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable subject material. This requires students to engage with the material in question to challenge their previously held perspectives. A leading voice for the concern is political scientist Anamaria Dutceac Segesten. She asserts, “Impinging on academic freedom is synonymous to lobotomizing the brain – the basic survival functions may still be performed but the patient has lost her/his ability to reason.” In Segesten’s view, the main goal of education is to instill critical thinking that contains traumatic material. The purpose of trigger warnings is to benefit those that have panic attacks, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) flashbacks, and other affective reactions to traumatic material. For more depth and explanation on these distinctions see S.E. Smith, “On The Difference Between Trigger Warnings and Content Notes, and How Harm Reduction is Getting Lost in The Confusion,” XO Jane, May 27, 2014, accessed June 1, 2014, http://www.xojane.com/issues/trigger-warnings-content-notes-and-harm-reduction; Jackie Peterson, “Edit Desk: Trigger Warning: ‘Trigger Warnings’,” The Brown and White, November 5, 2015, accessed November 5, 2015, http://thebrownandwhite.com/2015/11/05/edit-desk-trigger-warning-trigger-warnings/.


25 Anamaria Dutceac Segesten, political scientist, is interested in power relations within social & political life and how that power reflects in the academia. For more see her InsideHigherEd biography accessed September 15, 2015, https://www.insidehighered.com/users/anamaria-dutceac-segesten.
skills and challenge the student. If the material creates an affective reaction in pursuit of this goal, it is not a pressing concern.

Roxane Gay, a writer and English professor at Purdue University, develops a version of this perspective in her piece questioning the effectiveness of trigger warnings online. She states, “There is nothing words on the screen can do that has not already been done. A visceral reaction to a trigger is nothing compared to the actual experience that created the trigger.”

In the academic freedom camp, three themes emerge to justify the exclusion of trigger warnings. These intertwined themes include fears of censorship, the idea that students are coddled, and negative impacts on critical thinking.

Instructors at both Columbia University and American University view trigger warnings as a direct threat to academic freedom, seeing them as a form of student-censorship in which the student decides which course material is offered, shuttering the marketplace of ideas. This argument is grounded in practice, as students at some universities have in fact demanded that certain literature be removed from the curriculum. The concern that this will lead to a chilling effect in the classroom, silencing both dissent and challenging topics, has helped spearhead the academic freedom

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cause. This concern has led to tabling student proposals for trigger warnings and adopting faculty clauses that explicitly reject a “required” implementation of trigger warnings.30

The fragility of the student has become another key target in this discussion, as the use of trigger warnings is often associated with coddling. Opponents of trigger warnings worry that a generation of students produced by the self-esteem movement and accustomed to helicopter parenting believe that they should not have to face challenging conversations or topics.31 The focus on the coddling of students is a common theme both in news media and higher education blogs. Nick Gillespie, editor in chief of Reason.com, argues that students are treated like “human veal” who are not capable of protecting themselves.32 Gillespie stresses that college should be where administrators and faculty take a stance that pushes against a student’s sensibilities. Voices within academia, such as Walt Gardner, focuses on the use of trigger warnings as “coddling,” a buzzword cited to further justify academic freedom.33 The coddling argument states that trigger warnings

30 See Mike Vilensky, “School’s Out at Columbia, but a Debate Over Trigger Warnings Continues,” Conor Friedersdorf, “A Faculty Unites to Champion Free Speech on Campus,” and Alexandra Sovkos, “Columbia Adds Toni Morrison, But Not Trigger Warnings, To Required Reading.”


Finally, some opponents of trigger warnings worry that they have an adverse effect on critical thinking and fail to prepare students for “real life.”\footnote{Laurie Essig, “Trigger Warnings Trigger Me,” \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education}, March 5, 2014, accessed March 25, 2014, http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/03/10/trigger-warnings-trigger-me/; Sarah Roff, “Treatment, Not Trigger Warnings,” \textit{The Chronicle of Higher Education}, May 23, 2014, accessed July 8, 2014, http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/05/23/treatment-not-trigger-warnings/} Laura Essig explains, “Trigger warnings are a very dangerous form of censorship because they’re done in the name of civility. Learning is painful. It’s often ugly and traumatic.”\footnote{Essig, “Trigger Warnings.” Laurie Essig is an associate professor of sociology and gender studies. From the above referenced article, Essig continues, “The world is a painful and anxiety-inducing place, and human representations of the world are often painful to consume. But rather than retreating into a world where our courses are reduced to viewings of \textit{My Little Pony}, let’s all put on our big-girl panties (or big-boy tighty whities, as in the case of the Wellesley statue) and face that world together. Let’s talk about it, think about it, write about it, analyze it, and, in the end, learn to engage fully with all of it, even those parts that cause us to curl up in pain and sob. Because that’s what a real education requires…”} The argument here is that prior to college, the majority of the student population does not face direct challenges to their belief system or cultural assumptions.\footnote{Colleen Flaherty, “Harvard Law Professor Says Requests for Trigger Warnings Limit Education about Rape Law,” \textit{InsideHigherEd}, December 17, 2014, accessed January 8, 2015, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/12/17/harvard-law-professor-says-requests-trigger-warnings-limit-education-about-rape-law.} Without exposure to topics such as sexual assault, students are not required to acknowledge the aftermath of an assault nor face the need for a societal intervention.\footnote{See Essig, “Trigger Warnings,” for further discussion on how trigger warnings can influence law school and the judicial system; See Shapiro, “Essay on Importance of Not Trying to Protect Students from Everything That May Upset Them” on the impact trigger warnings potentially have on critical thinking} Here the college classroom
serves as an environment for expanding critical thinking skills. The academic freedom camp posits that regardless of the material at hand, the classroom is a vital forum and trigger warnings will halt these difficult but necessary discussions. Without these conversations, the classroom is stripped of its potential as a place to experience monitored, productive discussion on difficult topics. Now that I have outlined the key concerns of the academic freedom side rooted in the themes of choice and free will, I turn to the other side of this public debate.

Many trigger warning proponents are concerned with creating and preserving the classroom as a safe space. Hannah Grouch-Begley is one of many students who have spoken out in favor of trigger warnings. She suggests that a key area missing from those opposed to integrating trigger warnings into the classroom is a candid evaluation of the emergency of “mental health support for students.” 39 This sentiment views trigger warnings as a step that can be taken to safeguard the classroom as a “safe space” for students. In the context of the classroom, a safe space is a place where students feel they can express their ideas and feelings about difficult subject material. 40 For many advocates, trigger warnings are essential if safe spaces are to flourish. The following themes stem from this position: permitting trigger warnings, protecting the students, and reducing physiological/psychological noise a student may experience when triggered.


Based on the considerable weight given to arguments about academic freedom, universities have sought a middle ground that stops short of mandating trigger warnings. Several institutions, including Oberlin College, the University of California-Santa Barbara, and Columbia University, allow instructors to opt-in to trigger warnings in their classrooms. By choosing to include trigger warnings, the faculty allow students to have the choice of whether they engage with the material. This reestablishes student agency by alleviating the “captive audience” dynamic in the classroom.

Protecting students is a serious concern. In the media coverage and online discussion surrounding trigger warnings, many of the individuals who support the use of trigger warnings became advocates after witnessing a student react emotionally to course content. Users of trigger warnings acknowledge that material can engage an audience on both cognitive and affective levels. They preemptively identify that a rhetorical situation will be influenced by affect in effort to maintain safe engagement surrounding difficult issues. That is, trigger warnings, rather than suppressing discussion and critical thinking, can create an environment in which learning outcomes are more likely to occur.

Furthermore, those wanting to safeguard safe spaces within academia assert that psychological and/or physiological noise impedes the learning process. These two

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42 Physiological noise is caused by an element of the physiological process, often times emotions, interfering with communication and understanding. Don H. Hockenday and Sandra E. Hockenbury. Discovering Psychology. 2nd ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2001) address how emotions function as a complex physiological state involving three distinct parts: subjective experience, a physiological response, and a behavioral or expressive response. With trigger warnings, the student has the subjective experience of sexual trauma. This leads to a physiological or heightened emotional response which produces a barrier to understanding. Once a student is triggered the emotion can manifest into flashbacks or panic attacks.
variables along with context have the potential to prevent the receiver from understanding or processing information. In situations where there is a high level of affective response, a listener may not be able to fully engage the material or demonstrate critical thinking skills. For example, material depicting sexual assault may cause a student to shut down or experience emotional flashbacks that make learning impossible for the rest of the class period. Now that I have outlined the major positions within the trigger warning debate, it is important to justify why this project is ideally suited for rhetorical analysis.

1.3 Justification of Study

The relationship between sexual assault and trigger warnings should be more than just a conversation carried out in media and public forums: the exigency of this topic warrants research consideration from a rhetorical perspective. This project initiates a conversation rooted in the question of an educator’s ethical responsibility. It seeks to extend conversations within the communication discipline that address rhetorical ethics, memory, and metaphor as overarching themes that will be threaded throughout the analysis.

First, this analysis extends the communication discipline’s commitment to rhetorical ethics or safeguarding the virtue of both the audience and the rhetor within the rhetorical situation.43 The idea of rhetorical ethics is particularly pertinent to understanding trigger warnings, because it orients our attention to the importance of creating a space of mutual

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respect and protecting a captive audience. This requires the rhetor to acknowledge the innate value of audience members instead of just looking to the rhetorical outcome(s).

This stance is necessary in effort to counter “second assaults,” if we consider educators as rhetors and students as a captive audience in the classroom. Interested in both interpreting public discourse about this issue and generating applied material for future engagement, this project also produces a set of practical suggestions to guide university educators, including instructors and Women’s and Gender center staff, when they seek to utilize trigger warnings within the academy.

Communication scholars are ideally suited to address how trauma can impact the rhetorical experience.44 This project draws inspiration from Kenneth Burke’s notion that critics of language should be focused on the cultural realities of human existence.45 Speaking about trigger warnings as though they exist for the purposes of indulging fragile sensibilities fundamentally misses their purpose: to mitigate harm among the most vulnerable in the classroom.46 In Permanence and Change, Burke highlights that speech

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46 Melissa McEwan, “Triggered.”
acts are not neutral, but instead saturated in morality as it not only names a situation, but also often instructs listeners in how they should behave towards the subject matter.\textsuperscript{47}

Arguably, the very term “trigger,” connotes violence and thus cannot be considered neutral language in this discussion of trigger warnings. Outside of the academic freedom position, trigger warnings are also contested rhetorically; “trigger” signifies embedded violence and highlights words with contested meaning or use reveal society’s system of attitudes and the actions that accompany them.\textsuperscript{48} Trigger warnings are a metaphor for how individuals can warn others about trauma. Burke writes “that the metaphor be tentatively shifted from a legalistic one suggesting repression to an optical one suggesting focus.”\textsuperscript{49} Trigger warnings allow individuals to move from addressing rape as only a violent act that should be prosecuted in courts to include focusing on how we communicate sexual trauma within course material and class discussion. In addition to examining how metaphors function as a rhetorical device in the trigger warning debate, this project will explore the possibilities for metaphors to facilitate rhetorical ethics by suggesting new possibilities.

If one does not provide a trigger warning, they fail to acknowledge the violence embedded within the classroom material. Masking or ignoring the presence of violence within material further reifies the problematic behavior as acceptable, instead of checking against it. It is my stance that the choice to issue a “trigger warning” is needed to address both the physical act and the violence that is central in conversations concerning rape


\textsuperscript{49} Kenneth Burke, \textit{Permanence and Change}, 141.
culture and trigger warnings. Attention to the rhetorical canon of memory and acknowledging institutional memory can further understanding of this issue.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes of Socrates’ apprehension regarding the negative potential reading can have on memory and the speech tradition. Socrates is concerned that if a speech is preserved, the audience will no longer have the same level of concern to remember specifics because the preserved speech act can be referenced. Socrates posits that the written word produces amnesia. This concern becomes reversed within the trigger warning debate, when scholars are asked to reconsider if in the case of trauma, the text itself can force a student survivor to re-experience the trauma. Instead of amnesia, the material may trigger a flashback which may force a student survivor to instead “remember” the embedded trauma. This leads to a new concern: the student’s ability to separate the trauma contained in classroom material and discussion from their own experienced trauma. Communicating trauma is complicated by a tension between remembering and forgetting.

Derived from the Greek *traumatizo* (meaning wound), trauma survivors inhabit bodies marked in ways that are invisible to most eyes, allowing survivors to pass as undisciplined by trauma. The most common exception to the invisibility of the assault survivor comes when an individual body is triggered by outside factors to recall the trauma of assault. This moment of remembering has side effects that warrant examination through rhetorical sensitivity and ethics. Beyond the politics of individual memory, this

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50 The following extended quotation showcases the depth of Socrates’ concern of memory erasure: “Writing will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality,” in Plato, *Phaedrus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), 5.
is an issue that can scale up to the academy in terms of how institutions value particular narratives and experiences.

Institutional memory, as discussed by Charlotte Linde, refers to the function of narrative in bureaucratic settings to (re)create and (re)produce the culture or the identity of the institution. Cultural constraints against speaking openly and directly about sexual violence are bound, in some cases, to effect institutional memory.\textsuperscript{51} Sexual assault remains underreported, which adds to one underappreciated function of trigger warnings: they mark trauma narratives, increasing the visibility of rape culture. Such conversations both name a rhetorical situation in the contemporary classroom and \textit{create} a rhetorical situation that warrants further examination. Barbara Biesecker argues that individuals should re-imagine the concept of rhetorical situations as a transactional, constitutive process that influences both the speaker and the audience.\textsuperscript{52}

Using this perspective, this project explores how best to frame issues of assault and trigger warnings within the contemporary socio-political environment. Viewing triggering as an extrinsic reaction ignores that the individual’s reaction is fundamentally interconnected to the rhetorical situation that introduced the material. However, within a transactional understanding the speaker accounts for the trauma present within the material and also acknowledges an individual’s experience with trauma is an integral part of the learning experience. In these instances, violence and trauma in the classroom material and in lived experience can be discussed. The transactional view helps prevent individuals from assuming the violence depicted in learning material exists within a


vacuum and instead acknowledges the continued prevalence of violence outside of the classroom context. This has the potential to open additional avenues to address the pervasive issue of sexual assault and rape culture facing the academy.

By marking classroom material that includes sexual violence with a trigger warning, the academy is saying sexual violence is never acceptable. Trigger warnings allow universities to address rape culture proactively as students learn to deconstruct the power silence holds by increasing the opportunity to discuss and examine sexual violence. By adopting trigger warnings as a part of classroom pedagogy, the institutional memory of the academy is changed as the academy no longer allows representation of sexual violence within classroom to go unnoticed. Instead, by placing attention on acts of sexual violence within class material and discussions students are better trained to both identify and discuss sexual violence more often. This pivot allows the institution to not only address sexual assault on multiple fronts but may also increase a dialogue about how to respond and report acts of sexual violence.

1.4 Preview of Dissertation

This dissertation aims to establish a methodological framework for the analysis of opposing viewpoints in the trigger warning debate, and then explores what this analysis means for rhetorical ethics. The next chapter, “Adopting a Critical Pedagogy Lens,” outlines the theoretical framework of critical communication pedagogy and explains the critical commitments within this project. Chapter three identifies and discusses my methodology, “critical indexing,” which brings together indexing and ideographic analysis. The project then proceeds to examine how trigger warnings are discussed on
blogs, higher education op-eds, and media coverage in chapter four to better understand how such texts (a) construct and reflect social and political issues in discourse, (b) exert and negotiate power relations through discourse; and (c) produce and reflect ideologies in language. Chapter five develops a justification for adopting trigger warnings to avoid what I call ‘second assaults’ or the potential for retraumatization of sexual assault survivors. Additionally, this chapter provides practical suggestions to educators on how to adopt trigger warnings in their syllabi. Finally, chapter six maps out issues for future study and discussion as critics, communication scholars, and community members continue to resist rape culture.
CHAPTER TWO
Adopting a Critical Pedagogy Lens

Over the last several years, I have noticed that when the topic of trigger warnings is brought up in academic conversations, one can expect a slight pause. This pause has come to signify a sense of trepidation, a silence that lingers until one aligns with one side or the other regarding trigger warning debate. Those supporting trigger warnings are labeled as liberal snowflakes not willing to accept harsh reality. Whereas those opposing trigger warnings are heartless, insensitive individuals, whose beliefs continue support rape culture. Though I am highlighting caricatures of each side, these perceived incongruities have led to polarization instead of understanding. Therefore, it is necessary to remember that at its core, the trigger warning controversy centers on questions of pedagogical practice rather than merely personal politics. In this chapter, I establish the importance of a critical framework before aligning this project within the theoretical framework of critical communication pedagogy (CCP). CCP is founded upon ten scholarly commitments. Throughout the next section, I parse out the pieces of theoretical framing that allow me to engage the CCP commitments.

2.2 Critical Pedagogy

Employed within the classroom to influence both teaching and learning outcomes, critical pedagogy is a practice that was derived from the Frankfurt school’s critical theory. Critical pedagogy is an approach defined by Henry Giroux as "[an] educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the
ability to take constructive action.” Additionally, critical pedagogy functions as a tool that encourages students to identify the concrete conditions of their daily lives as a means to acknowledge the imposition of socio-political limitations. Fundamentally, the aim of this approach is to transform a “language of critique” into a “language of possibility.”

Giroux suggests that educators should seek to analyze educational contexts and environments to transform outcomes through the application of critical theory. Within critical pedagogy, the critical eye focuses on oppression present within the educational context by “signal[ing] how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities.” In other words, critical pedagogy advocates for oppressed positionalities to transform the classroom into a potential space for social justice.

Educational theorist Paulo Freire acts as a foundational scholar for the development of critical pedagogy. Freire identifies education as cultural action for

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2 Henry A. Giroux, Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning (South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey, 1988). Domination and oppression are worked into the traditional educational setup, through which an educational setup, through which a “culture of silence” is formed by eliminating the paths of thought that lead to a “language of critique” (p.111-112). Conversely, the “language of possibility” represents the aim of the critical educator "to raise ambitions, desires, and real hope for those who wish to take seriously the issue of educational struggle and social justice" (p. 177).


emancipation against disciplinary structures.\textsuperscript{6} Put simply, critical pedagogy includes acting against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by focusing on the restorative function within education. Thus, the aim of Freire’s critical pedagogy is to restore individual agency to encourage marginalized groups to regain their stolen “voice” as a means of empowered cultural emancipation.\textsuperscript{7} A common goal of critical pedagogy focuses on the ability to develop and sustain critical consciousness. Grounded in Marxist critical theory, critical consciousness emphasizes developing an in-depth understanding of the world, permitting the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. Freire encourages educators to develop praxis that emphasizes “power, history, memory, relational analysis, justice (not just representation), and ethics as the issues central to transnational democratic struggles.”\textsuperscript{8} This pedagogical shift becomes vital because, as Giroux argues, “with public institutions—including universities—increasingly under siege by conservative forces, it is imperative for educators to acknowledge Freire's understanding of the empowering and democratic potential of education.”\textsuperscript{9} The development of critical pedagogy should be interdisciplinary, as well as theoretically and politically engaged with society. However, one should avoid reducing critical pedagogy to mere political work judged by its educational effectiveness in political scenarios.

To enact such a pedagogical perspective, Seehaw Cho suggests that critical engagement with students includes two major agendas: “transformation of knowledge

\textsuperscript{7} Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 25.
\textsuperscript{8} Freire, \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}, 14.
\textsuperscript{9} Giroux, “Lessons from Paulo Freire.”
Concerning curriculum, critical pedagogy as a dialogue must begin from a defined starting point, from the concrete possibilities and limitations of individuals within the context of the system in which they are imprisoned. One way pedagogical practices can imprison students is through curriculum. For example, Peter McLaren identifies the disparity and difference between curriculum and hidden curriculum. While the curriculum signifies explicit guidelines (i.e. syllabi) that teachers follow to facilitate educational goals, the hidden curriculum refers to “the unintended outcomes of the schooling process.”

The hidden curriculum infiltrates systems of governance, educator attitudes, and other factors that determine the educational outcomes of students.

Much of the academic literature in this area supports deciphering the status quo, building a democratic, critical, and anti-oppressive pedagogy focused on cultural, economic, and political critique, and creating an egalitarian and democratic view of civil society. Recently, education scholars have extended critical theories that seriously question capitalist, racist, sexist, ablest, speciesism, and other oppressive ideologies and argued for critical literacy and cultural critique. Instructional methods in the critical pedagogical lineage tends to avoid the traditional lecture as information transmission in

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12 McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy.”

favor of pedagogical practices in “reflective thinking” and the dialogical method, socio-cultural criticism, textual analysis/deconstruction, problem-solving, critical thinking, and social action. In order to achieve these educational goals, critical pedagogy is rooted in uncovering and examining power, ideology and knowledge.

Concerning power, critical pedagogy practices emphasize dialogic exchange. Freire identifies dialogue as “one of the most important aspects of critical pedagogy,” claiming it “speaks to an emancipatory educational process that is above all committed to the empowerment of students through challenging the dominant educational discourse and illuminating the right and freedom of students to become subjects of their world.”

A dialogical approach reimagines how we discuss and analyze education from a prescriptive stance to a descriptive stance; thus, encouraging an open, interdependent and constitutive relationship between educators and students. In this model, instead of centering the educator as the transmitter of knowledge, both students and educators have something to offer and something to learn.

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18 The dialogical approach should not be conflated with discourse, or “a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area.” Hence, discourses that exist within the public sphere often dictates what can be talked about by disciplining marginalized experiences. Peter McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts,” 72.
2.3 Building a Response within Critical Communication Pedagogy

Communication scholars Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren develop critical communication pedagogy (CCP) as an effective framework to analyze the relationship between power and communication within educational contexts. CCP encompasses critical theories’ dedication to social change by centering a social justice model within the classroom.\(^{19}\) Specifically, Fassett and Warren explain:

> critical communication educators look to postmodern and post-structural understandings of human identity, to senses of students and teachers as relational selves produced in collusion and collision, to theories and methodologies that help them account for identities as produced in cultural – and therefore inherently ideological – contexts.\(^{20}\)

Since its inception in 2007, CCP has increasingly become a form of pedagogical questioning and research focus.\(^{21}\) In a sense, CCP functions as a critical orientation for educators to consider adopting as pedagogical practice. Fassett and Warren offer educators ten commitments to consider when enacting CCP: identity is constituted in communication, power is fluid and complex, the centrality of culture, communication is constitutive of larger social systems, social critique places communication practices in context, language and its analysis, pedagogy and research as praxis, nuanced understanding of human subjectivity and agency, dialogue as both method and metaphor


for relationships. In the remainder of this chapter, I detail how these commitments function within the theoretical underpinnings of this project.

### 2.3.1 Language Constitutes Identity

The first commitment outlined by Fassett and Warren posits that humans produce identity in and through communication. This causes CCP to move away from essentialist notions of social identity, or more restrictive views of identifying labels. In other words, CCP encourages educators and scholars to recognize identity as a fluid construct that is socially constructed and interchangeable given societal influences. Such an understanding becomes vital when addressing non-normative identities as their positionality is often described as fluid in nature. These identities are often underrepresented in instructional literature within the communication field as research in this subsection of the discipline is quantitative in nature. This paradigmatic focus causes the extant instructional literature to place static identities on students and instructors. CCP allows researchers to account for the co-construction of identity within the classroom, opening up a space for more identity representation.

I embrace this first commitment by engaging texts that represent both supporters and opponents of trigger warnings – ensuring that multiple viewpoints are present in my description of the debate. I also grapple with the ideological implications that are present regarding trigger warnings as praxis for each perspective of the debate. For example, scholars like Roxane Gay remain staunchly against trigger warnings because of the

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hierarchal value that they appear to place on suffering. Her ideological foundation, which is heavily rooted in race and feminist theory, obviously plays a role in her position and her perspective within the debate. Deconstructing such ideological assumptions and perspectives are further explored in chapter four.

Additionally, recognizing the socially constructive capabilities of communication, this commitment requires me to account for the criticism that trigger warnings for sexual assault material reify victimhood. Politically, my commitment to utilize trigger warnings in the classroom now also symbolically constructs the identity of a survivor within assignments and readings. For the students, the presence of trigger warnings could further galvanize the idea of fragility. Because identity politics saturate the implementation of trigger warnings, it is important to note how identities are co-constructed and reconstructed within the classroom when doing critical work regarding pedagogy.

2.3.2 Power is Inevitable

The second commitment portrays power as both dynamic and complex. Within CCP, power can best be understood through a Foucauldian lens. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes modern society as a “disciplinary society,” meaning that power is largely exercised through disciplinary means within a variety of institutions, including school systems. To account for a Foucauldian sense of power within the trigger warning debate, I utilize his framework to filter each side of the trigger warning debate through three key scopes of analysis: (1) Power is not an entity to itself but a

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relationship between entities - omnipresent at every level of the social body. This observation acknowledges that while power is not simply a property of the State, critics should examine how the State’s exercise of power populates through the social body. Power is exerted from within discourse choices, as well as replicated throughout social norms; it engages both the power behind discourse as well as the power within discourse.  

(2) Power is not simply repressive, but it is productive. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to resist. If one fails to tackle the multiple sources of power, “one risks allowing…this class power [to] reconstitute itself even after an apparent revolutionary process.”

(3) The exercise of power is strategic and war-like. If disciplinary power is about training the actions of bodies, biopower is about managing the reproduction and illnesses of a population.

As Fassett and Warren surmise, “critical communication educators bear the responsibility of exploring power and privilege, even – and especially – if that process implicates our own work as teachers and researchers.” Foucault’s understanding of power, in terms of how I have expressed it here, forces the educator to recognize their

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25 Majid Khosravinik and Mahrou Zia, “Persian Nationalism, Identity and Anti-Arab Sentiments in Iranian Facebook Discourses: Critical Discourse Analysis and Social Media Communication,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 13, no. 4 (2014): 755-780. See page 756 for a more in-depth explanation of these two terms. “Power behind discourse” refers to the mass mediated text while “power in discourse” refers to an individual’s word choices and/or stylistic choice of sharing the information.


power within the classroom and account for potential abuses they may enact toward their students. I take up these power filters to discover how power undergirds the trigger warning debate further in chapter four.

2.3.3 Culture is Core

The third commitment requires educators to maintain the centrality of culture within the classroom. Fassett and Warren use “culture” to account for individualized lived experiences and larger societal practices. This commitment acknowledges that the classroom does not function as a culturally neutral zone, but as a space where multiple cultures and identities gather together – encouraging educators to accept and explore how various social experiences operate in tandem with classroom material.\(^30\) The Obama administration’s establishment of a special task force regarding the epidemic of rape culture across the nation’s college campuses functioned as a motivation for this study. Based on the evasiveness of rape culture on college campuses highlighted by the special task force, I argue that trigger warnings are a necessary pedagogical intervention. The presence of trigger warnings can simultaneously account for rape culture and assault that is potentially perpetuated through course material, as well as serve as the first step in response to the rape culture epidemic faced within the academy.

To take up the social justice charge given by former President Obama, chapter five focuses on evaluating various options that can be employed to negotiate the presence of trigger warnings within the classroom. I argue that exploring the possibilities and uses for trigger warnings is essential in actively engaging with the fight against the epidemic

of rape culture plaguing campuses across the nation. The use of trigger warnings also addresses the role of affect within the classroom. As Rick Phelan explains, “motivation and affect are extremely important variables that can make the difference between success and failure in the classroom. Many students with special needs may benefit particularly from strategies to enhance motivation and affect.”31 In this case, students facing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms require extra consideration regarding the impact affect can have on their well-being. By recognizing the pervasiveness of rape culture as well accounting for the various cultural experiences faced by those who have suffered trauma, I maintain that culture is a key component in the critical purpose of trigger warnings.

2.3.4 Larger Social Structure Systems

Fassett and Warren’s fourth commitment requires educators to focus on concrete, mundane communication practices as constitutive of larger social structural systems.32 Essentially, this commitment highlights the interconnectedness between everyday practices and knowledge, identity, and ideologies on a social/cultural level. As a researcher, one can look to the implementation, rejection, and/or preservation of ideologies as a constitutive element. For example, a point of contention within the debate surrounding the embrace or rejection of the confederate flag stems from the contested ideology of a proud history vs. a history of racism in the South. The stance one takes within the debate is dependent upon the language utilized by the arguer to describe the


32 Fassett and Warren, Critical Communication Pedagogy, 43.
same social structure history. Thus, a major component of critical pedagogy is rooted in examining the societal influence ideology has within language and the classroom. Foucault argues that ideology does not work to distort and mystify the truth as much as to produce and legitimate a regime of truth; ideology is a process.\textsuperscript{33} In other words, curriculum and pedagogical acts function to normalize and naturalize ideological judgment. Ideology acts as a terministic screen, influencing the implicit meaning behind how we privilege certain discourses. As such, examining ideology is crucial to identifying the value and belief structures that undergird and influence how we view the world and education.

Failure to see classroom pedagogy as a form of ideological production thwarts both students and educators from acknowledging the origin of epistemological claims for truth. His conception of ideology is fundamentally grounded in a theory of interest, or how particular interests are embodied in various discursive practices.\textsuperscript{34} The concept of ideological hegemony accounts for the fact that ideology often develops out of inequities that privilege the dominant group. In this instance, it is important to note that ideology engages in both positive and negative functions. On the positive level, ideology allows individuals to make sense of their experiences through ties of values and ethics. Positive ideology helps inform the social and political landscape. Conversely, on the negative level ideology solidifies normative practices by entrenching the practice in moral ground. This in turn serves as a disciplinary function for actions and beliefs that are non-normative. Throughout this project, I engage in ideological analysis to understand the

\textsuperscript{33} Michel Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 204-205.

\textsuperscript{34} Henry A. Giroux, \textit{Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition} (South Hadley: Bergin and Garvey, 1983), 45.
broader value hierarchy regarding how the established hierarchy both safeguards and replicates within the academic institution. This analysis allows me to speak on how ideological resistance and reification function on a macro-level. I analyze the function of <protection> (both positive and negative) within chapter four to further uncover the ideological underpinning surrounding the trigger warning debate.

### 2.3.5 Unveiling Oppression

The fifth commitment of CCP suggests that by situating oneself within mundane communication practices, educators can unveil oppressive institutional and social contexts. Additionally, this allows individuals to view communication as a co-constructive activity rather than a reified practice. Within this commitment, it is vital to observe and attend to everyday classroom interactions and explore how they help reconstruct institutional norms. Fassett and Warren note, “any examination of institutional practices… must reflect the local and immediate context of members’ experiences and situate those experiences in relation to larger social circumstances...”\(^{35}\)

Within this dissertation, I utilize this commitment to examine the local and immediate context in terms of studying any one use of trigger warnings as opposed to analyzing broader public discourse regarding trigger warnings. One way to access this understanding comes with specifically examining Foucault’s concern regarding the relationship between knowledge and power.

Foucault outlined what he believed was the real political task within our society: to criticize and examine the inner workings of institutions – especially those that present

themselves as neutral. For Foucault, the purpose of criticism is to utilize the critical eye to unmask political violence done by an institution.\textsuperscript{36} A central claim within the corpus of his work is the mutually influential relationship between power and knowledge. He classifies knowledge as a byproduct that is created within the intersection of human nature and human behavior. Foucault believes knowledge is never neutral, as it determines power relations – the expansion of numerous bodies of knowledge not only reinforces but also interacts with power.\textsuperscript{37} Fundamentally, power and practices of punishment rely on knowledge that produces and categorizes individuals; in turn, this type of categorization serves as a disciplinary function.

While Foucault originally developed his articulation about power and knowledge in the context of prisons, he asserted the tension between power and knowledge spreads into all institutions, especially educational institutions. Schools serve the same function as prisons and mental institutions: to define, classify, control, and regulate people. While trigger warnings do not fundamentally change the nature of educational institutions, they allow for "unveiling oppression" by allowing educators and students to check in with each other during moments of potential re-traumatization.

\textbf{2.3.6 The Centrality of Language}

Commitment six extends the constitutive role of communication by focusing on language as a system that we use to objectify subjective meanings and to internalize socially constructive meaning. To meet this commitment, I look to Kenneth Burke’s

\textsuperscript{36} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 284.

\textsuperscript{37} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 219.
theories of language, specifically, his belief that language is central to our understanding of the world around us. Language becomes a vessel for symbolic interaction and social meaning making. As Burke explains in *Permanence and Change*:

> But speech in its essence is not neutral. Far from aiming at suspended judgment, the spontaneous speech of a people is loaded with judgments. It is intensely moral – its names for objects contain the emotional overtones which give us the cues as to how we should act toward these objects. . .Spontaneous speech is not a naming at all, but a system of attitudes, of implicit exhortations. . .An important ingredient in the meaning of such words is precisely the attitudes and acts which go with them. . .these emotional or moral weightings inherent in spontaneous speech tend to reinforce the act itself, hence making the communicative and active aspects of speech identical. Such speech is profoundly partisan.  

This Burkean lens, which I further discuss in the next chapter three, allows a critic to consider the implications of different language choices through language choices, and accounts for motives imbedded subversively throughout language choices. By tracking how both sides of the debate conceptualize the use and value of trigger warnings in their linguistic articulations, I highlight how language choices provide vivid rebuttals and responses between texts.

### 2.3.7 Reflexivity is Essential

Commitment seven names reflexivity as an essential component to critical communication pedagogy. Reflexivity encourages us to not only be aware of our own enacted identities but also to question the ideology that supports those actions, requiring a dual response from the researcher: to reflect on how society looks within a critical lens, while also reimagining resistive options towards oppressive dominant ideologies present within everyday discourse. To engage this commitment, I utilize an autoethnographic approach within chapter five. Autoethnography is inherently reflexive in nature. Stacy

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Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis note that autoethnography is not mere navel gazing, but rather, a highly reflective process with four primary purposes: (1) critiquing (make contributions to, and/or extend existing research and theory), (2) making research accessible to multiple audiences, (3) embracing vulnerability in an effort to understand emotions and improve social life, and (4) breaking silences by reclaiming lost and disregarded voices. These standards require reflexivity in both the engagement and understanding of academic conversations, as well as deciphering the cultural experiences with multiple audiences.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that I come to the trigger warning debate with a clear bias as an educator and survivor of assault. As such, I try my best to remain objective while addressing trigger warning opposition. The advice of Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis has guided my process as it forces me to reflect upon various sources of information as I write about my personal connection to the topic. I must also remain transparent regarding the political and personal capital that I have invested within this research as an advocate, educator, and survivor. These social positions influence my writing, and I account for them throughout this dissertation. Additionally, I discuss how reflecting upon this project has inspired me to include trigger warnings in my classroom.

2.3.8 Pedagogy and Research as Praxis

Commitment eight is heavily influenced by Freire’s notion of praxis. Specifically, Fassett and Warren ask scholars and students to criticize moments of oppression and discuss modes of implementation for resisting the oppression. In other words, simply

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critiquing the oppressive systems is not enough – one must look to possible avenues for change. As noted in chapter one, many individuals are trying to socially and politically account for the role that rape culture plays within higher education in our contemporary cultural moment. Although *Hunting Ground* took an unapologetic and tragic look at how sexual violence propagates on college campuses, this singular critique is nothing without application. A good example of a campaign aimed at raise awareness regarding sexual violence and reducing sexual assault comes from President Obama’s “It’s On Us” movement. “It’s On Us,” began in September 2014 in hopes that the new school year could offer students the opportunity to increase awareness regarding sexual assault on college campuses while additionally teaching bystander intervention.

While there has been movement regarding the social understanding of rape culture on college campuses, more needs to be done on a pedagogical level to create moments of rupture. One such rupture can be experienced within the construction and focus of chapter five, which identifies and unpacks five strategies for adopting trigger warnings in the classroom. I argue that the adoption of trigger warnings functions on a political and personal level. Politically, they act as a rhetorical acknowledgement of the rape culture crises in institutions of higher education. Personally, the adoption of trigger warning re-instills student agency by placing the onus on them to decide whether they are ready to engage in the possibly triggering material.

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2.3.9 Nuanced Agency

The ninth commitment requires educators to account for how identities, agency, and praxis is complicated and nuanced. Accounting for multiple articulations (and pointing out how these various perspectives are subtly different) aids in the achievement of transforming the classroom into a space for potential social justice. As a scholar, I envision the consideration and adoption of trigger warnings regarding sexual assault as a means of promoting social justice and resisting rape culture. Since assault survivors may not be marked by a visible disability, despite suffering from PTSD an invisible disability, the inclusion of trigger warnings highlights the nuance of that identity.

2.3.10 Metaphor and Method

Rounding out the 10 commitments, Fassett and Warren contend that dialogue functions as the key tool for social change. As such, CCP advocates for a dialogic and reflexive approach in both teaching and learning. Within my dissertation, I parse out the major concerns both camps have within the debate and attempt to dialogically engage them in analysis. By doing so, I unpack the central metaphor of the trigger warning debate itself and uncover ideological assumptions within the dialogue. As an interpreter of the debate, CCP suggests that I take responsibility for how I interpret all positions of the debate.

As previously stated, I contend that the classroom functions as a co-constructed space that is negotiated and maintained by both educators and students. In teaching and learning, trigger warnings rely on the power of dialogue, as trigger warnings, in their most basic articulation, serve as rhetorical resistance to rape culture and further
victimization. I employ CCP’s proposal of method by thoroughly exploring trigger warnings as a response to rape culture. Essentially, I am advocating for a rhetorical, pragmatic reaction to a culturally pervasive issue.

Throughout this chapter, I outlined the importance of engaging trigger warnings within a CCP understanding. For each commitment, I discussed ways in which other theorists inform how I approach the engagement of CCP or explain how I view the application of the commitment. As such, this critical framework influences my methodological choices, which I discuss in more detail in my next chapter. In tandem, the critical framework and methodological approach allows for a full investigation into the trigger warning debate, as well as guide my pragmatic suggestions for integrating trigger warnings into the classroom.
CHAPTER THREE
Indexing Intent: Charting the Trigger Warning Debate

In 2013, Ruxandra Looft, a professor at Iowa State University, started the conversation regarding the use of trigger warnings as a pedagogical practice.¹ In a post on Shakesville, a feminist blog, Looft discussed the need to develop a more nuanced trigger warning practices for educators to utilize within the classroom. Specifically, she explained the conundrum some educators face regarding the discussion of explicit material and themes, suggesting that educators need to “strike that balance between fostering an atmosphere of openness and willingness to tackle difficult subjects while watching for the cues and signals that relate someone's discomfort and pain.”² Looft articulated a tension in pedagogical practice: while trigger warnings might empower students by giving them agency in the classroom, she worried that they also risked outing students with trauma. A year later, students across the United States, most notably at the University of California-Santa Barbara and Oberlin College, echoed Looft’s desire to incorporate trigger warnings in the college classroom. Student-led advocacy for trigger warnings within the classroom quickly crystallized into a broader public debate on the issue, prompting academics to pick sides about how trigger warnings could impact education. To understand these developments, this chapter examines rhetorical discourse at its most basic component, language choices. To best uncover the ideological underpinnings of these argumentative choices, I begin by describing the methods of indexing and ideograph analysis and discuss why this dual approach is well-suited to the


² Looft, “How Do Trigger Warnings Fit Into the Classroom Lesson Plan?,”.
goals of this dissertation. Finally, I explain how texts were selected to better understand the linguistic battle over trigger warnings.

3.2 Indexing

Words have power. While this mantra is often repeated, it holds particular salience as we seek to understand how public discourse impacts the trigger warning debate, and how different audiences interpret it. To account for the levels of power within messages, the critic cannot merely criticize the texts at the denotative level, in the texts’ own terms. Instead, the critic should aim to uncover what is implicitly hidden within discourse choices and the implicit relationships between the discourse and the author. Burke identifies this relationship between discourse and the author as “frames of acceptance” within discursive choices, which are “the more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man [sic] gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it.”³ In his Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, Burke suggests that the interdependence between powerful words not only influences the authority of the utterance, but creates a way of understanding one’s reality as well.⁴ The trigger warning debate is more than just a debate on nomenclature or pedagogical practice, as stances are deeply entrenched in personal experience and understanding.

Understanding the discursive struggle between those trying to maintain academic freedom and those promoting safe spaces using trigger warnings requires acceptance that discourse in its essence is not neutral; the spontaneous speech of an individual is

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loaded with judgments. Burke describes the speech act as intensely moral with emotional overtones. However, the speech act becomes further complicated once the utterance is no longer referring to an object but is humanized to refer to an individual who is represented by interwoven discourses, knowledge, and power. “Trigger warnings” become humanized as stakes of educator autonomy and student well-being become the focus of discourse.

In the foreword to Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, William Rueckert declares that Burke’s notion of indexing is the key to understanding how a term is operationalized. Operationalization of terms allows critics to fully understand the texts as well as be able to access and question the structure in which the discourse is produced and reproduced. To do so, indexing requires the critic to pick a key term— in this case “trigger warnings”— in order to track how the word is deployed in a variety of ways within rhetorical contexts. The critic charts how many times the key term was used within the text, along with noting words that surround the key term as a means of gathering contextual clues to ideology. Like cluster analysis, Burke's indexing method offers the rhetorical critic a way of obtaining a more holistic picture of a given rhetorical text by necessitating a holistic, contextual glimpse of important terms. Indexing differs from cluster analysis by engaging in questions of power and ideology in a way that cluster analysis does not require. Indexing is less concerned with epistemological

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7 Burke, Essays Toward a Symbolic of Motives, xiii-xvi.
approaches, but instead is centers on the sustainability of the key term itself. In other words, an ontological focus allows the critic to uncover workable categories to show the interrelationship and difference between categories of indexing. Enoch further explains this, stating critics employing indexing should “immerse themselves in the various sides of the debate to learn how each side is made and remade through linguistic choices.” In this case, indexing focuses on understanding the multi-faceted ways that trigger warnings are utilized in academic debates and media coverage. For example, in the debate over trigger warnings, both sides call upon the ideal of “protection.” By examining how “protection” is operationalized within a text, the critic can determine the author’s position in the debate. If the author uses “protection” in conjunction with academic freedom, their view of trigger warnings most likely varies in comparison to an author that uses “protection” in relationship to a student’s emotional reaction.

To provide further depth and understanding to indexing as a method, I turn to the recovery and reconstruction work done by David Erland Isaksen. Isaksen outlines the components of indexing and provides direction for scholars wishing to adopt the method. Indexing relies on two steps within the textual analysis: (1) uncover implicit motives/ideologies within texts through tracking a key term; and, (2) construct how the key term functions within a motivational hierarchy. I track the term “trigger warnings” to

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10 David Erland Isaksen, “Indexing and Dialectical Transcendence: Kenneth Burke’s Critical Method,” Masters of Arts, Brigham Young University, 2012. In his thesis, Isaksen utilizes Burke’s writings on indexing, Burke’s correspondence with students in his method and theory of indexing class taught at Bennington College, drafts from Burke’s archives, interviews done with Burke’s former students about indexing, and an analysis of class materials from his course.
better understand how this term is deployed in a variety of rhetorical contexts, seeking to reveal hidden value judgments or alternative perspectives.

The first step of indexing requires the critic to find the key terms in the text and then analyze how these terms are used, determine what these terms mean (or “equal”), and notice when the meaning of the terms shifts or stays consistent. “Equations” examine what the relationship is between the key term and surrounding words.\textsuperscript{11} For example, following the clamor at Oberlin College to mandate trigger warnings, faculty noted “‘triggering’ material was mocked as overly politically correct.”\textsuperscript{12} Identifying the relationship between triggering material (the key word) and politically correctness (an important term surrounding the key term) emphasizes the ontological connection between the two terms.\textsuperscript{13}

Once the critic identifies the key term and various equations within the text, connotative understanding can be garnered by looking for “chains of consequences.” While “equations” refer to examining the words that surround the key term, a “chain of consequence” is interested in unpacking the ideological assumption of the utterance. A “chain of consequence” is created by the utterances surrounding the tracking term.\textsuperscript{14} What is at stake in the equation of trigger warnings is the manifestation of a tension between political correctness and sound pedagogy. Before the critic can complete this step, it is also important to identify if the key term is utilized in conflicting ways and if

\textsuperscript{11} Isaksen, “Indexing and Dialectical Transcendence.”


\textsuperscript{13} Burke, “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education,” 270.

\textsuperscript{14} Burke, “Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education,” 270.
so, how? Indexing as method highlights a “pattern of experience” that influences how individuals can engage with the text and society. This “pattern of experience” often is value-laden in that the critic can also extrapolate possible ideographs that prop up the examined text.

While the first step of indexing concerns the horizontal function (what words are clustered around the key term) and uses of the ‘equation’, the second step requires a vertical assessment (what ideologies are promoted in the text) of the index findings to construct a hierarchy of understanding of the key term/equation. This leads to what Burke defined as “dialectical transcendence,” or building terministic connections that lead to the understanding of the key term to move into a realm beyond one’s initial judgment or understanding. Arguably, this step implicitly links to what Burke identifies as “god terms” (the words one embraces) and “devil terms.” (the words one avoids) For Burke, while value judgments may influence the hierarchical structure choices, the vertical assessment is still constrained by the symbolic function of language. Through establishing a hierarchical understanding of the index, critics can move toward “consummation,” or uncovering the meanings and implications inherent within a given term. In the example above regarding triggering material and political correctness, a


16 James P. Zappen, “Kenneth Burke on Dialectical-Rhetorical Transcendence,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 42, no. 3 (2009) Dialectical transcendence “leads, on the one hand, toward ‘pure persuasion’ and ‘ultimate identification’ and, on the other, toward the pragmatics of a new rhetoric and a revolutionary program of lifelong education,” 280.

17 Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 159.

18 Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 29-44.
vertical assessment of the index would uncover the value the author assigns to political correctness.

By establishing a robust tracking guide, or a list of occurrences of the key term and the words surrounding it within each chosen texts, the critic is able to identify both the consequential disciplining within the terms as well as liberating potential that could possibly lead to social change.\textsuperscript{19} I contend that critical pedagogical analysis can add another layer of understanding to indexing by placing the language involved within this controversy in context as a means of extending the textual arguments into the social applied responses. This influenced my decision to organize my rhetorical analysis into two chapters: one indexes the ideological presence of \texttt{protection}, while the other chapter engages an applied approach via critical pedagogy to respond to the imbedded politics in the trigger warning debate. As this dissertation seeks to suggest pedagogical options of using trigger warnings within chapter five, indexing becomes critical to this endeavor as indexing is the bridge between critical pedagogy and rhetoric as indexing requires uncovers power and ideology.\textsuperscript{20}

To further center and establish indexing’s potential to uncover the ideological underpinning within this disagreement, I sharpen the focus of this criticism by utilizing ideographic analysis. Based on the increased social commitment to account for sexual assault, ideograph analysis is an ideal companion method to indexing as it not only identifies the ideology used but also works towards dissecting the critical assumptions within the ideograph.

\textsuperscript{19} To index, I created a spreadsheet that tracks how trigger warnings are discussed within the academic freedom frame and how trigger warnings are discussed within the safe space frame.

\textsuperscript{20} Enoch, “Becoming Symbol-Wise,” 274.
3.3 Uncovering Embedded Ideographs

Michael Calvin McGee posits that as humans we are “conditioned, not directly to belief or behavior, but to a vocabulary of concepts that function as guides, warrants, reason, or excuses for behavior or belief.”²¹ Because language is the chief tool for ideological compliance, ideological criticism is well suited to be placed in conversation with a Burkean methodology rooted within language. Additionally, McGee and Burke both support a focus on evaluating symbol use as a means to uncover embedded meaning. Established by McGee, ideological criticism focuses on the examination and dissection of language. McGee defines the ideograph as, “[an] ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal.”²² Within this study, ideographic criticism sheds light on how rape culture systemically propagates within everyday language and practices. I seek to uncover how patriarchal thinking continues to weaponize sex as a tool for domination and/or punishment. Conversely, proponents of trigger warnings should be weary of establishing trigger warnings as a complete solution to the issue of rape culture within the classroom.

McGee explains that ideographs operate as a “rhetoric of control, a system of persuasion presumed to be effective on the whole community.”²³ As such, they tend to benefit perspectives of privilege. This is apparent when looking to the rhetoric of each side within the trigger warning debate, those opposed to trigger warnings can use ad


hominem attacks while supporters of trigger warnings utilize psychological research. As such, it becomes important to remember that at its most basic level, the trigger warning discussion focuses on the tension on who should be <protected> within the academy: the educator or the student. Within this study, I suggest that <protection> does not have to operate as an either/or binary but instead can focus on both/and. Thus, it is important to note that individuals who challenge dominant societal ideographs are often disciplined and/or silenced.

McGee reminds us that “those that do not participate in enacting and upholding the ideologies of their culture are disciplined.”\textsuperscript{24} Within rape culture, this often results in victim-blaming; therefore, utilizing ideographic criticism allows the critic to look beyond the surface level of a particular term/language choice and instead evaluate the roots entrenched with beliefs and value judgments. This is particularly useful as a critic tries to evaluate how ideographs create not only value judgments but also cultural understanding. Culturally, hegemonic ideology must be “renewed, reinforced, and defended continually through rhetorical strategies and practices.”\textsuperscript{25} In essence, resistance to dominant ideologies are often muted or subsumed by the powers that be. Now that I have established the justification and use of ideological criticism, I pivot to explain how a critic performs an ideological criticism.

Embedded within ideographs, are “structures of public motives” that are ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronous’ patterns of political consciousness which have the capacity both to control ‘power’ and to influence the shape and texture of each individual’s

\textsuperscript{24} McGee, “The Ideograph,” 435-436

reality.”26 Diachronically, the critic is examining the history or lineage of the ideograph, paying specific attention to how the ideograph has been used over time. Synchronously, “ideographs seem structured horizontally, for when people make use of them presently, such terms as ‘rule of law’ clash with other ideographs…and in the conflict come to mean with reference to synchronic confrontations.”27 Essentially, a synchronic focus not only reveals how the ideograph is being utilized in the here and now, it also allows the critic to examine how a particular ideograph stacks up against other ideographs. Additionally, it allows the critic to examine how an ideograph has been reified within the cultural memory.

Celeste Condit and John Lucaites describe ideographs as sites of structured tensions between emerging social commitments and public scrutiny of established ideographs.28 They contend ideographs epitomize legitimate obligation to behaviors necessary within the "rhetorical process of public argumentation in which various organized and articulate interest groups negotiate the problems of resource distribution in the collective life of the community."29 Within the trigger warning discussion this has resulted with a focus upon <safety>, but more specifically <protection>. To extend the critical nature of ideographic criticism, I contend that during the negotiation of an ideograph the dominant party can best exercise their force because of ideological clawback, an attempt to neutralize marginal experiences by realigning the experiences

29 Condit and Lucaites, Crafting, xiv.
within the dominant understanding. John Fiske and John Hartley acknowledge how ideological clawback benefits the dominant group most often because the dominant group pulls the working ideograph back into reified historical meaning. As such, discussion from the margins often goes unheard because it challenges the legitimacy of public behavior. Ideographic criticism’s critical turn focuses on how power is manipulated and/or maintained. This method allows me to better integrate the theoretical framing of chapter two.

Ideographic criticism is also well suited for creating societal changes. Foss asserts that ideographic criticism “uncovers subversive values that are often embedded within the ideograph to not only reveal the reified social understanding of the ideograph but may also challenge the status quo.” This turn to critical examination may help the critic identify hegemonic ideology which requires constant reification. Hegemonic ideology within a culture is often renewed and defended through the communicative choices of the dominant group. As such, ideographic criticism has the potential to offer a corrective course to challenge the ideograph for societal change. Thus, chapter five focuses on how proponents of trigger warnings may utilize this pedagogical tool in a variety of ways to safeguard protection of the student and classroom decorum.

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32 Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 209.
3.4 Mutually Informed Methods: Critical Ideographic Indexing

The goal of these combined methods is to engage the *dissoi logoi* surrounding the use of trigger warnings in academia. I use indexing in tandem with ideographic analysis, an approach I call “critical ideographic indexing.” Utilizing indexing informed by ideological criticism accounts for the most damning criticism of indexing: that Burke never clearly outlined how to evaluate the tracked term on the horizontal base and vertical base. Ideographic criticism allows these bases to be more explicitly developed. The horizontal base is constructed through synchronic analysis. Specifically, “ideographs seem structured horizontally, for when people make use of them presently, such terms as ‘rule of law’ clash with other ideographs…and in the conflict come to mean with reference to synchronic confrontations.” The vertical base, which is said to represent Burke’s god and devil terms, can be developed through noting the negotiation of power relations and the presence of ideologies within language choices. This maps on nicely to McGee’s focus on diachronic analysis which focuses on how the ideograph has been used historically. However, it is vital to note that McGee believed that regardless of the rigorous nature of tracking an ideograph diachronically, it is not as important as the present usage of the ideograph.

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33 If we consider that the key term is at the center of a Cartesian coordinate system, the x axis represents the horizontal base while the y axis represents the vertical base. The horizontal base of indexing is determined by frequency and intensity. This gives a one-dimensional analysis of the terms. The vertical base represents the inclusion of Burke’s concept of god and devil terms. Burke calls a “god term,” the ultimate ideal and a “devil term,” which the ultimate negative. Clusters that move trigger warnings toward purification would be charted above the axis as god terms, while clusters that demonize trigger warnings would be charted below the axis.


By utilizing indexing in tandem with ideological criticism, scholars can track how a particular word or phrase, in our case “trigger warnings,” manifests and supports ideological underpinnings. Additionally, while indexing can track the occurrence of a word, ideographic criticism attempts to uncover the embedded intentions within the rhetoric. The benefit of combining these two methodologies develops as indexing serves as a tool to integrate ideographs with an added level of specificity. Ronald Lee notes, “ideographic criticism focuses on the intersection and negotiation between discourse and power, helping to frame and reify societal ‘truths’.”36 This sense of rhetorical perspectivism allows for an enriched understanding of the horizontal base within this study’s analysis. Ideological criticism is also complementary to the critical framework of this project as ideological criticism focuses on the relationship between language concerning societal influences such as power.37

Burke ruminated that indexing could expose the “pattern of experience” or “motivational structures” a text embodies, and thereby assisting critics in producing societal change through rhetorical intervention.38 Additionally, indexing allows the critic to strengthen the diachronic presence within the analysis as the critic can now better examine the nuanced ways the ideograph has been reimagined. Indexing also allows the critic to expand the possible scope of ideographs within a studied text because multiple articulations of ideographs may be captured within indexing. Within my analysis, I learned the trigger warning debate includes <knowledge>, <safety>, and <freedom> to

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38 Isaksen, “Indexing and Dialectical Transcendence.”
name a few. If I did not utilize indexing to uncover these given ideologies I might have missed how both sides are utilizing <protection> most often as the crux of the argument. Burke wanted indexing to aid the critic’s ability to comprehend the influence of language and persuasive structures on human action.

3.5 Justification of Texts

Collectively, these methodological choices enable an analysis of trigger warnings as a case study to better understand rape culture. While collecting texts, I followed the standard outlined by Khosravinik and Zia: “there should be a vertical contextualization level (linking online and offline discourses) in addition to a horizontal contextualization (tracing discourses across relevant online platforms).”\(^\text{39}\) To analyze the public discourses surrounding trigger warning and sexual assault on U.S. college campuses, I engaged in a critical indexing focused on discussions happening within academe. I collected 61 op-ed pieces between January 2014 to June 2015. This period begins with Slate Magazine’s naming 2013 the year of a trigger warning and then follows the trigger warning debate through a full academic school year. The conversation was continuously updated using Google Alerts on trigger warnings. To analyze and critique discourses surrounding trigger warnings and the academy specifically— rather than just searching for “trigger warnings” or “sexual assault” — I looked to publications focused on university education, such as Inside Higher Ed and college newspapers. I read each article and excluded those

\(^{39}\) See Khosravinik and Zia, “Persian Nationalism,” 758.
which generically addressed trigger warnings to focus exclusively on trigger warnings related to sexual assault.40

Kieran O'Halloran encourages critics to utilize a pedagogical framework, or what he terms as “digital argument deconstruction.”41 Digital argument deconstruction uses corpus linguistic analysis of web resources to ascertain recurrent concerns of the relatively powerless “Other.” The approach is grounded in Jacques Derrida’s “ethics of hospitality to the other.”42 The hospitable analyst acts as interpreter for the marginalized or relatively powerless other so that they may evaluate the ethics of any given argument. Critical ideographic indexing focuses on what is ethical instead of political subjectivity to allow arguments to be evaluated from the perspective of key concerns/motivations of the counter-discourse.

I looked to higher education op-ed pieces on websites such as The Chronicle of Higher Education and InsideHigherEd to trace the voices of academics on this issue. The initial media coverage was in response to student advocacy for trigger warnings on campus, and as such, tended to focus on specific events at specific universities. I explore the perspective of professors as they voiced their opinions on the topic, I gathered higher education op-ed pieces, which often appeared in the form of the open letter. The open

40 The choice to narrow this project to sexual assault trigger warnings was made based on the current socio-political debate and concern of sexual assault on campus.

41 See Kieran O'Halloran, “Counter-discourse Corpora, Ethical Subjectivity and Critique of Argument: An Alternative Critical Discourse Analysis Pedagogy,” Journal of Language and Politics 14, (2014). Via analysis of appropriate web resources, the reader in effect shows digital hospitality to an unfamiliar relatively powerless Other in not only learning about how they see things, but also taking on their perspective for the duration of the analysis. Text evaluation in digital argument deconstruction means the reader uses a new surrogate subjectivity – they “act on behalf” of a relatively powerless Other in analysis of the argument.

letter’s “persuasive function” has been used as a stylistic choice in effort to influence the public’s opinions and perceptions surrounding an issue.\textsuperscript{43} Higher education opinion editorials also allow for a digital footprint to be established in analyzing the pedagogical concerns of trigger warning use.

Now that I have established the methodological framework of critical ideographic indexing and outlined the spheres of textual analysis, I apply this within the following chapters to better understand the trigger warning debate. I begin my textual analysis by addressing how academics negotiate both power and ideology within the classroom in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR
(De)constructing the Classroom

As educators and advocates, it is imperative to account for the theoretical underpinnings that not only influence how we construct the classroom, but also impact students’ learning outcomes. Relatedly, by better understanding how the trigger warning debate influences class material and classroom decorum, this analysis suggests how power and ideology function as invisible class participants that influence educational outcomes.¹ In this chapter, I first outline how <protection> is mechanized by both sides of this debate as the root ideograph. In the process of indexing the texts, it became apparent that both sides utilize <protection>; however, the debate becomes about who deserves more protection: the student or the educator. Instead of examining various tangents within the debate by centralizing the scope around <protection>, the analysis uncovers the competing ways that a specific ideograph can be utilized within trigger warning argumentation. Following this analysis, I examine the various ways power is exerted within the classroom and trigger warning discussions. It is my hope that calling out the sometimes-invisible role of ideology and power will yield new understanding of the usage of trigger warnings within academia. Thus, I begin by accounting for the diachronic aspect of <protection> within the debate before turning to the synchronic articulations of <protection>.

¹ I understand decorum as adhering to conventional standards in effort to maintain proper behavior within an established context. Thus, throughout this chapter I examine the negotiation and function of decorum within trigger warning negotiation,
4.2 Reimagining the Diachronic Role of <Protection>

The national conversation regarding trigger warnings within higher education is relatively new as the discussion gained primary traction during the 2014-2015 school year. Since then, the debate lost some of its initial vitality within academic discourses. McGee suggests that when a critic begins evaluating and understanding a cultural ideograph, it is important to account for the ideograph’s diachronic history. Diachronic analysis examines the history of an ideograph’s usage as a means of continuing or contesting the historical and/or institutional memory and accuracy of how a culture has come to understand an ideograph. Condit and Lucaites explain, “the diachronic structure of an ideograph represents the full range and history of its usages for a particular rhetorical culture.”\(^2\) As such, I outline the cultural history that both sides utilize for legitimization.

Tracing the various ways <protection> is employed by opponents of trigger warnings allows for a better understanding of how an educator’s academic freedom is linguistically safeguarded. Academic freedom can be best understood as a tool to protect educators from punishment or retaliation from the academic institution, students, and/or the general public regarding their chosen research focuses and/or course material. While indexing the trigger warning debate, I found that academic freedom became the primary warrant for opposing trigger warnings. In this case, <protection> was mobilized to help secure the educator’s instructional choices. Of course, this ideograph is not new; educators concerned with academic freedom have recognized the importance of

<protection> as a vital ideograph for over a century. During the 1915 conference for the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), a committee convened to define the concept and standards of academic freedom. Since 1915, the standards of academic freedom have been further outlined and developed into three imperatives. These imperatives acknowledge that many educators find themselves at the crossroads of community advocacy and institutional endorsement. As such, the AAUP’s most recent description of academic freedom suggests that educators are protected in the following ways: (1) educators should enjoy the freedom to pursue research interests without fear of reprisal from their institution; (2) educators are granted freedom in the classroom regarding the choice of classroom material and pedagogical tools; (3) college and university educators have multiple identities, including community citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. As such, educators should consider their varied roles when making public statements. The organization sought to create a framework that outlines rights and standards of academic freedom because educators were concerned that personal pedagogical choices within the classroom and/or personal research interests could negatively impact their employment. It is also important

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4 It is worth noting that the AAUP warns educators that they should not include controversial material within the classroom that is not directly in line with the educator’s subject area. For example, in my communication classes, the AAUP would caution me critiquing rape law unless it was directly tied to understanding direct communication concepts.

5 American Association of University Professors, “1940 statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,” extends on this section by suggesting, “When [educators] speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence, they should always be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.”
to note that the AAUP does not outline student rights within their documents. In fact, the only mention of students is that students are best academically served when the institution protects an educator’s right to academic freedom.

More than one hundred years after it originally sought to define the standards and best practices for academic freedom, the AAUP remains the primary source for outlining the rights and protection of educators. In 2014, the AAUP released an official statement regarding the relationship between trigger warnings and academic freedom: “A current threat to academic freedom in the classroom comes from a demand that teachers provide warnings in advance if assigned material contains anything that might trigger difficult emotional responses for students.”6 The organization then makes its stance against trigger warnings even clearer, stating that “Institutional requirements or even suggestions that faculty use trigger warnings interfere with faculty academic freedom in the choice of course materials and teaching methods.”7 Trigger warnings and safe spaces, in theory, attempt to warn and shield students from material that might remind them of past trauma or reinforce a hostile experience. However, the AAUP and others have made a clear longstanding case for the protection of educators and by extension, the academy.

While opponents of trigger warnings tap into these historical arguments about the importance of academic freedom to justify protection, it is equally important to uncover the diachronic lineage of those who use protection to advocate for trigger warning inclusion.

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7 American Association of University Professors, “On Trigger Warnings”.
Alternatively, trigger warning advocates draw from feminist and medical arguments to make their case concerning the <protection> of students in the classroom. As noted in chapter one, trigger warnings became popularized within feminist circles and the blogosphere as a marker for trauma. Ali Vingiano explains that trigger warnings began appearing on feminist message boards for discussions of sexual assault in the late 1990s.\(^8\) The concept of emotional triggering, however, dates back as far as 1918 when psychologists realized they needed to account for “war neurosis” (or, what we now refer to as post-traumatic stress disorder).\(^9\) Hence, some may argue that trigger warnings gain some level of social acceptance based on their tie to psychology. The original intent behind trigger warnings was to prevent individuals suffering from trauma from being “triggered” into a flashback related to that trauma.

While some opponents of trigger warnings deny their <protective> potential, Jeet Heer argues that trigger warnings should not be mistaken as a mere tool for political correctness. He suggests we should give more merit to the use of trigger warnings based on their medical lineage. Heer explains that medical terminology is often adapted to social nomenclature as part of a “thriving vernacular therapeutic culture” in the United States in which lay individuals “borrow concepts from psychology and use them as tools of self-improvement, often, in the process, forming distinct political and social identities.”\(^10\) This

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\(^9\) Vingiano, “How the ‘Trigger Warning’ Took Over the Internet.”

means that there is a rich history of adapting and adopting rhetorical markers, such as trigger warnings, which migrate from medical to everyday contexts.

Regarding <protection>, the establishment of “vernacular therapeutic culture” focuses on how rhetoric can become a pathway for understanding and inclusion. However, this path of understanding does not come without contest, as rhetorician Dana Cloud suggests that the underlying problem with a “rhetoric of therapy” is that it erodes the potential for actual social change. Cloud argues that a culture that has adopted a “rhetoric of therapy” should be warned that “concepts such as coping and adapting replaces active attempts to reform flawed systems of social and political power.”

Throughout this study, I contend that the use of trigger warnings to mark material that may evoke PTSD symptoms and responses is a first step in accounting for rape culture and has a preventative potential as rape culture becomes further interrogated. In other words, I argue that in this case we must address language choices first if we hope to employ future institutional change towards sexual assault prevention. It is neither my stance nor the stance of most advocates for trigger warnings that the inclusion of warnings is the only action required to address rape culture and sexual assault. Trigger warnings, in my view, are not an act of censorship, but instead an act of rhetorical transparency regarding the context of teaching material and classroom discussion. They allow for all involved to offer their consent regarding engagement.

Perhaps the best way to understand how <protection> has always been a focus of trigger warning inclusion is to look to personal testimony. Jonno Revanche reflects on the protective potential of trigger warning usage, suggesting that the impetus for trigger warning

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warning inclusion “feels like our understanding of social responsibility and community are 
coming to the forefront.” 12 After reflecting on the first time they, as a student, were 
exposed to trigger warnings in a school assembly about bullying, Revanche continues, “It 
was a powerful memory and was the first of many that really began to make me think 
about power dynamics in conversation and how they can be directly assessed for the 
benefit of everyone.” 13 By addressing the progression of trigger warnings in regards to 
providing <protection>, one can see the diachronic lineage of this important ideograph 
within the debate. Outside of the diachronic level of <protection>, it is equally as 
important to breakdown the synchronic development of <protection>.

4.3 Protecting Education

In practice, trigger warnings take on many different forms, giving ammunition to 
critics who often see warnings as overzealous attempts to shield students from reality. 14 
Critics of trigger warnings prefer the strategy of exposure to difficult or potentially 
triggering materials, including allusions to sexual assault in texts, classroom discussion, 
or multimedia, as opposed to avoidance. Such critics argue that the university is not a 
space for acknowledging student sensitivities, but instead a place of learning. By 
indexing the role of <protection> within the trigger warning debate, I have identified 
three unique lines of argument against trigger warnings: trigger warnings hinder

12 Jonno Revanche, “A History of Trigger Warnings, and the Price and Diversity of Pain,” The Vocal, (No 

13 Revanche, “A History of Trigger Warnings, and the Price and Diversity of Pain.”

14 Hannah Groch-Begley, “Trigger Warnings. Safe Spaces, and the College Mental Health Crisis Media 
Coverage Ignores,” Media Matters, May 22, 2015 accessed July 3, 2017, 
education, trigger warnings are too nebulous for pedagogical adoption, and trigger
warnings harm student mental health.

Trigger warning opponents focus on how the practice hinders the education
process. They assert that by refusing to utilize trigger warnings within their classroom
they are <protecting> the academic process by preserving concepts of academic rigor and
struggle. In 2014, a collective of seven professors from the humanities penned an op-ed
piece addressing the implications of trigger warning usage for *Inside Higher Ed*. They
wrote, “We feel this movement is already having a chilling effect on our teaching and
pedagogy. [A] movement with the intent of minimizing student pain may be, in fact,
ineffectual as well as harmful to both students and faculty.”

The chilling effect that
these professors are alluding to is the belief that educators will feel pressured to make
their classes as aseptic as possible in an effort not to offend some student’s sensibilities.
<Protection> is easily invoked as a shield for academic freedom regarding both the
educator and the course material. The fear of having students lodge complaints over an
educator or course material causes what some see as the most damning form of
censorship, self-censorship. The crux of this argument is that implementing trigger
warnings has an adverse residual effect. While students may feel more protected,
educators become increasingly vulnerable. This vulnerability is rooted in student
complaints.

Additionally, others argue that trigger warnings violate the purpose of the
academy to challenge a student’s perceptions and lived experiences. In fact, a very

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popular sentiment of those opposed to trigger warnings is best represented by David Linton, an emeritus professor of communication and media arts at Marymount Manhattan College. Linton posits that the purpose of higher education is to provoke students into critical thinking. In the humanities and social sciences, he said, "we are in the business of triggering." Courses in these areas, Linton argues provocatively, “should not come with trigger warnings, but trigger guarantees.”\textsuperscript{16} In fact, some would say educators are failing to push students to a higher level of understanding if the course material fails to make some students uncomfortable. Michael Olivas, William B. Bates Distinguished Chair of Law and director of the Institute for Higher Education Law and Governance at the University of Houston, opposes trigger warning policies entirely, as well as the idea that any topic – whether it’s sexual assault or immigration or disabilities – should be avoided in the name of student comfort: “Classrooms are supposed to be didactic and challenging… I actually see it as part of my job to make students feel uncomfortable, not comfortable.”\textsuperscript{17} This mindset creates a unique tension regarding the ideograph of <protection> as opponents continue to assert that as educators’ utilizing provocative and shocking methods within the classroom is both sound and successful pedagogy. To protect the intent of higher education, classrooms should act as a place of confronting new ideas and material.


there is a slight pivot regarding how <protection> is evoked. Opponents suggest that <protection> is an all-or-nothing stance; if we cannot ensure that trigger warnings provide <protection> for everyone all the time then trigger warnings should not be used by anyone. On a practical level, critics say, to define what deserves a trigger warning in classes is nearly impossible based on acknowledging students have differing sensibilities and experiences.\(^{18}\) In other words, trigger warnings are seen as unsound pedagogy as an educator is both unable to predict who may be triggered by material as well as being unable to predict when a student will be triggered. Marc Blecher, a professor of politics and East Asian studies at Oberlin, said the problem with trigger warnings generally is that “what could trigger off somebody in the abstract is almost anything.”\(^{19}\) Thus, if they were to adopt trigger warnings as pedagogical practice, professors across the academy would have to be concerned with how the material may be triggering as well as negotiating the most effective way to warn students ahead of time. This practice may set a dangerous precedent for education as the adoption of trigger warnings will surely privilege some acts of trauma above others. Trigger warnings become a way to unintentionally create a hierarchy of ‘who suffers most.’ By not being able to easily identify clear standards for usage, trigger warning adoption would signal a state of false <protection>, as there are no guarantees on how any student may respond to any given material.

The concern that trigger warning usage offers false <protection> is experienced on two fronts: educators identifying a training gap and educators voicing trigger warnings


\(^{19}\) Marc Blecher, quoted in Flaherty, “Trigger Unhappy”. 
are not an effective inoculation tool against trauma. To begin, there is concern among educators that the use of trigger warnings will blur the line of expertise. Specifically, most educators have not received training to effectively respond to a student’s mental health needs. Elizabeth Freeman, professor of English at the University of California at Davis, expands on this concern by noting:

Most faculty are not trained to handle traumatic reactions. Although many of us include analyses of the cultural logics and legacies of trauma and/or perpetration in our courses, this expertise does not qualify faculty to offer the professional responses traumatized students may need. Institutions seriously committed to caring for traumatized students ought to be directing students, from their first days on campus, to a rich array of mental health resources. Trigger warnings are not an adequate substitute for these resources or for the information students need to get help.\textsuperscript{20}

The argument is that trigger warning usage now introduces new loci of experience within the classroom, psychological support. As such, the educator may be expected to respond to trauma with the same level of expertise as they have with course material. Additionally, educators could argue that this pivot to mental health violates classroom decorum (where the expectation is learning class content) and risk transforming the classroom into group therapy. As the classroom context transforms into a student-centered environment as opposed to remaining educator-centered. The voiced fear of not being properly trained to address students’ mental health needs highlights a concern for student well-being, which is overshadowed at times within this debate.

Outside of training concerns, some educators suggest that trigger warnings fail to produce a sense of safety. On this front, fear of false <protection> resonates with professors who have experienced trauma and with some who have not. For example, one instructor who described herself as a rape victim and lifelong feminist said, "I have no

\textsuperscript{20} Elizabeth Freeman, et. al, “Trigger Warnings are Flawed.”
evidence that trigger warnings lead to anything but the cultivation of a posture of fear.”

Another wrote: “We seem to be in a golden age of passive aggression, whereby the speech of others can be controlled or stopped if one feels ‘uncomfortable.’” Several educators who have been diagnosed with PTSD criticized students’ request for trigger warnings as “narcissistic or as reflections of the students’ sense of privilege.” This particular rejection of trigger warning usage is linked to the criticism of “coddling” or being “overly protective” of students to the point of detriment. While some opponents of trigger warnings may reject the use of trigger warnings because of the promotion of false protection, a larger argument for opponents is crouched in asserting trigger warnings may damage a student’s mental health.

Many opponents denounce the protective potential for trigger warnings by referencing exposure therapy as a potentially valid education alternative. David Linton notes that he has not seen any specific research that shows any real harm caused by exposure to triggering material. This research gap allows opponents of trigger warnings to turn the intention for protection into an act of destruction, further hindering students emotionally and intellectually based on the practice of exposure therapy. It is important to note a few things in response to the idea that a student may actually improve from exposure therapy: (1) exposure therapy requires special psychological training which many educators do not have, as noted above; (2) exposure therapy is not often used by

21 Schmidt, “Many Instructors Embrace Trigger Warnings, Despite Their Peers’ Misgivings”.

22 Schmidt, “Many Instructors Embrace Trigger Warnings, Despite Their Peers’ Misgivings”.

23 Schmidt, “Many Instructors Embrace Trigger Warnings, Despite Their Peers’ Misgivings”.

24 David Linton, quoted in Schmidt, “Many Instructors Embrace Trigger Warnings, Despite Their Peers’ Misgivings”.

professionals because of the psychological risk of re-traumatization; (3) exposure therapy, when practiced, is utilized after intense talk therapy. Based on these findings, educators should reconsider the use of exposure to traumatic material as a <protective> act.

As an extension on this stance, public commentators have argued that addressing trauma within a vacuum, or in this case, a classroom, the academy is failing to prepare students for the “real world” that comes with no trigger warnings. Peggy Noonan, cultural critic and writer for the Wall Street Journal, censures the practice of trigger warnings by noting, “In an attempt to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, schools have overreacted by prohibiting teachers from dealing with anything that has even the remotest possibility of hurting a student's feelings.” Noonan argues that the world is an unsafe place, and that students should not try to shape it into something more comforting by requesting trigger warning inclusion. This creates yet another gloss on how false <protection> is being mechanized within the debate.

Finally, others denounce the guise of <protection>, fully claiming the use of trigger warnings is dangerous. This perspective is not concerned with trigger warnings creating a temporary space of false safety. Rather, it is concerned with actively harming the student’s well-being. This is akin to what Kenneth Burke calls “exorcism by

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27 Noonan, "The Trigger-Happy Generation".
misnomer,” or “one cast out demons by a vocabulary of conversion.” Opponents suggest that including trigger warnings before covering traumatic material runs the risk of misplacing the source of trauma. That is to say, those affected by trauma may conflate the relationship between the material marked by the trigger warning and their actual experienced trauma. This conflation could lead to the student believing that their ability to engage with the traumatic class material is a cure for the actual trauma. Additionally, the use of exorcism by misnomer suggests trigger warnings do not cure the epidemic of assault on college campuses, but instead potentially further mask rape culture and assault.

Laurie Essig, associate professor of sociology and gender studies at Middlebury College, insists that trigger warnings conflate the relationship between trauma present within course material and the experienced trauma. Essig continues by stating, “[trigger warnings] demean and diminish real trauma to argue that consuming [course material] is an act of violence.” Essig’s analysis suggests we risk having some students equate trauma within course material as being as traumatic as physical assault. This, in turn, diminishes the violence within rape as mere discomfort. Alternatively, because of exorcism by misnomer, trauma survivors may believe consuming material marked by trigger warnings is a sign of their personal ability to heal and/or cope from the experienced trauma. Both possible interpretations risk the equivocation of trauma. As noted earlier, Essig goes on to say, “Trigger warnings are…dangerous censorship because they’re done in the name of civility. Learning is painful. It’s often ugly and


It is important to note that this line of argumentation creates a unique juxtaposition for proponents of trigger warnings because Essig asserts the best way for educators to provide protection for students is rooted in trigger warning rejection.

Additionally, Essig suggest that supporters of trigger warnings are treading on dangerous ground because acts of civility are not always in the best interest of the intended parties, in this case students. Dana L. Cloud argues that civility is a true threat to academic freedom. Based on Cloud’s analysis, civility erodes academic freedom because educators feel the need to self-censor within the classroom as a means to not politicize content. Thus, educators that tend to be more critically grounded are typically at the greatest risk for reprimands. Within the trigger warning debate, opponents hold that civility and antagonism within trigger warning support is at best is rooted in contradictory ground as trigger warnings may prioritize some forms of trauma over others which may result in trigger warnings to become a tool of exclusion. This concern for exclusion becomes amplified amongst trigger warning critics when trying to discern what deserves a trigger warning. Admittedly, even within my own study, I have reduced the scope of what material deserves a trigger warning down to only focusing on material that may be seen as traumatic for students whom have experienced sexual assault.


The call for civility becomes further complicated as Essig suggests that the use of trigger warnings may not truly aid the very students that they are meant to protect.\textsuperscript{34} Seen from this perspective, trigger warnings, at best, treat trauma through avoidance as opposed to reparative pedagogy. To put it more directly, Essig questions the protective potential of trigger warnings by noting:

One of the cardinal symptoms of PTSD is avoidance, which can become the most impairing symptom of all. If someone has been so affected by an event in her [sic] life that reading a description of a rape in Ovid’s Metamorphoses can trigger nightmares, flashbacks, and panic attacks, she [sic] is likely to be functionally impaired in areas of her [sic] life well beyond the classroom. The solution is not to help these students dig themselves further into a life of fear and avoidance by allowing them to keep away from upsetting material.\textsuperscript{35}

Here, the argument is that trigger warnings must be rejected for the psychological protection of the student. As this is one of the few times that the opposition evokes how trigger warning rejection is actually done to protect the well-being of the student, some may say that this stance requires for us to determine which side of this debate best meets student protection. This focus gives an alternative understanding to the debate as there is no longer a clash between educator needs and student needs. However, before further complicating the issue, it is vital to remember the limitations and risks that I previously outlined within exposure therapy. Essig’s positioning also suggests that a student’s well-being may be better attained through homeopathic exposure. Kenneth Burke defines homeopathic exposure as treatment through exposure as opposed to


Homeopathic exposure happens when the individual garners healing effects from witnessing/consuming material that has been marked with trauma. These healing effects arguably outweigh the initial discomfort from exposure.

Although this project seeks to find a way forward for productively using trigger warnings in the classroom, it is not my intention to caricature trigger warning opponents or suggest they have no respect or concern for students and educators that have experienced sexual misconduct. In fact, this research reveals that there are a number of different reasons that individual instructors might want to include course material dealing with sexual violence themes. In general, though, they seek to do so in order to (1) show students that they are not alone in their experience and/or (2) provide the student with an opportunity to work through a representation of sexual violence that is not their own. Opponents believe these goals are best served without trigger warnings because they fear setting a dangerous precedent of censorship for academic material. Because ideographs function abstractly, multiple sides can utilize ideographs for opposing purposes. As such, the next section examines how trigger warning advocates similarly attempt to leverage <protection> for their cause.

### 4.4 Protecting the Student

As I charted the arguments made by those advocating for trigger warning inclusion, I found that <protection> narratives and justifications occurred with a higher frequency than any other ideographic development. Below, I outline how <protection> has been mobilized in support of trigger warnings in three key ways: trigger warnings

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allow for increased student engagement, trigger warnings respond to the conflation between discomfort and trauma, and trigger warnings honor the presence of trauma.

Within the academy, learning support measures must work to protect both the pursuit of knowledge through education and the canons of knowledge built over time. From this perspective, trigger warnings provide a method to address and preserve student engagement within the classroom regarding traumatic material. Advocates for trigger warnings refute the oppositional claims of “coddling the fragile snowflake,” seeking instead to humanize the student and their potential experience with trauma. *The Oberlin Review* acknowledges that demeaning those who have experienced trauma is problematic for all involved. Specifically, the editorial board states, “(trigger warnings) do not ‘glorify victimhood’; instead, they validate the life experiences of certain members of our community and allow individuals to make informed decisions.”

Oberlin College, University of California-Santa Barbara, and Brown University have asserted that trigger warnings are better understood as a preparation tool for course material as opposed to an excuse to avoid course content. Other schools such as Drexel University and Bay Path University require the use of trigger warnings when covering material that contains sexual misconduct.

Educators who decide to apply trigger warnings in the classrooms recognize this nuance within the debate. As Aaron R. Hanlon, assistant Professor of English at Colby College suggests, “We have to take [students demanding trigger

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warnings] seriously… because being more acutely aware of how students are responding to challenging material is just better and more responsible pedagogy. “David M. Perry, associate professor of history at Dominican University, extends Hanlon’s analysis through his exploration of how trigger warnings allow professors to include offensive, but educational, content in a responsible manner. Far from chilling speech, Perry demonstrates how the responsible use of trigger warnings allows a marketplace of ideas to flourish. In this sense, trigger warnings protect academic freedom by providing a responsible method to include controversial course material. The use of trigger warnings manifests academic freedom as the educator can both value student safety, and still utilize provocative material. Caroline Heldman, professor of politics at Occidental University echoes Perry’s analysis as she argues, “Trigger warnings actually help to make the class more academic. And it has the benefit of letting students prepare for what might come.”

Extending beyond protection of academic freedom, advocates note that trigger warnings also serve the important purpose of self-care for both students and educators. Counseling psychologist, Raphailia Michael defines self-care as “any activity that we do

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deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health.” ⁴² Within the university context, as a student, in order to address my own self-care and remain engaged with the expected material, I have staggered my reading of class assignments with a classmate in effort to know if traumatic material is included within the assigned text. In this manner, as a student, I was forced to create my own trigger warnings for course content to fully engage with the academic material I was provided. At the most basic level, self-care is crucial to any individualized coping mechanisms. Having an established plan of self-care is important both for dealing with traumatic material and for managing the generalized stress that students face. This crucial engagement with self-care is clearly demonstrated in Heldman’s syllabus, which reads, “If you are a trauma survivor, please develop a self-care plan for the semester so that you can effectively engage the course material and participate in class.” ⁴³ Alongside explicit incitements to engage in self-care, trigger warnings encourage students to be responsible for their emotional well-being as opposed to expecting the educator to manage student’s emotional reactions to material. Furthermore, trigger warnings can encourage students who have not been impacted by trauma to foster empathy for others, better preparing students for the real world through providing them with models of how to engage empathetically with others. In this sense, trigger warnings are connected to the ideograph of <protection> by establishing that sometimes, <protection> is something one must do for themselves. To delve more deeply into how <protection> is deployed as an ideograph,

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⁴³ Heldman, quoted in Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings”.

it is critical to examine how individuals conflate the relationship between discomfort and trauma.

Trigger warnings, at their core, were established to prevent individuals suffering with PTSD from experiencing unwanted flashbacks. A common criticism that is launched towards trigger warnings is the concern that once a trigger warning is issued, the educator enters a slippery slope where all course material now must be filtered through trigger warnings. Advocates see this concern as an alarmist critique, as it conflates all student discomfort with trauma. Having a student feel uncomfortable when confronting racism, violence, and other issues of systemic concern is different than triggering personally experienced trauma related to course material. Haylin Belay, a 2015 graduate of Columbia University, articulates the distinction between hurtful topics and triggering topics.44 She notes that students have said troubling things about subjects like welfare in classes she’s attended – a potentially uncomfortable moment, but not a triggering one. When she was upset by comments like that, she had a voice to counter them. She contrasts this with the experience of having a PTSD reaction, when a student might feel paralyzed and unable to speak at all and might disengage entirely. When unexpectedly confronting triggering material, students can easily be deprived of their ability to academically engage with content—guaranteeing that conversations will be dominated by those with the least experience. Trigger warnings typically mark material with close ties to PTSD; the two most common triggering topics are sexual assault and military

44 Haylin Belay, quoted in Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings”.
warfare. Charles Green, English professor at Cornell University explains that the most frustrating aspect of the trigger warning debate is this misrepresentation between discomfort and trauma. Those opposed to trigger warnings ignore that the intention and design of trigger warnings is to avoid re-traumatizing survivors. Trigger warnings allow for responsible engagement with traumatic material instead of either trying to erase trauma or normalizing trauma as something one must just accept as they move through classroom material and discussions.

Within the context of the shared space of the classroom, trigger warnings take on a more urgent exigence, as Angus Johnston, professor of history at City University of New York, explores. Inside the classroom, interactions are co-constructed by the relationship between the educator and the student, and Johnston’s concerns mirror a Freirean perspective because Freire encourages educators to reimagine their relationship to students. Specifically, Freire suggests that by acting as a facilitator of knowledge instead of the source of knowledge, educators encourage students to be active and critical participants in their learning. Symbolically, this perspective centers the student as the primary agent within their educational pursuits. Student centered education may help
trauma survivors regain personal agency as well. Johnston asks educators to reconsider the appropriateness of trigger warning usage in the context of a classroom:

First, [the classroom] is a shared space — we’re pretty much all stuck with one another, and that fact imposes interpersonal obligations on us... Second, [the classroom] is an interactive space — it’s a conversation, not a monologue, and I have a responsibility to encourage that conversation as best I can. Finally, it’s an unpredictable space — a lot of my students have never previously encountered some of the material we cover in my classes or haven’t encountered it in the way it’s taught at the college level, and don’t have any clear sense of what to expect. As a professor, I have an obligation to my students to raise those difficult subjects, but I also have an obligation to raise them in a way that provokes a productive reckoning with the material.50

Johnston accounts for the way the classroom often function as a captive environment for students. Based on the nature of captive environments, educators need to give added weight regarding consent. Instead of the educator forcing course material that may be traumatic in nature, trigger warnings serve as an agreement between the student and the educator that all involved can safely engage with course material. Additionally, Johnston notes that trigger warning inclusion helps to produce productive engagement with course content. As mentioned above, when students are triggered without warning, they will often disengage entirely. Through offering trigger warnings, educators can provide students the space they need to prepare for triggering material, allowing them to stay engaged in the conversation, as well as allowing them to work through the material at a pace that allows them to process, and engage, with the course. Alternatively, if students are forced to encounter triggering material without a warning, they experience a rupture

50 Angus Johnston, “Why I’ll Add a Trigger Warning.”
in classroom decorum,\textsuperscript{51} which may not only disrupt the class, but also serve as a barrier for student engagement.

The promotion of productive student engagement has long been a driving force for advocates of trigger warnings. For example, Caroline Heldman discovered the need for trigger warnings in the classroom almost a decade ago as students began experiencing PTSD-related episodes in her politics classes: “There were a few instances where students would break down crying and I’d have to suspend the class for the day so someone could get immediate mental health care,” she says.\textsuperscript{52} Heldman explains trigger warnings keep the long tail of trauma outside the doors of learning, rather than ushering it in.\textsuperscript{53} While Heldman offers an educator’s account of how triggering material impacts classroom dynamics, it is also important to account for students perspective’s since the classroom operates as a co-constructed space between educator and student. Importantly, the profound effect and use of trigger warnings in the classroom are often first observed for educators when they were students themselves. Since much academic writing is the province of an academic professional class, some of the clearest articulations of the importance of trigger warnings from a student’s perspective emerge from educators recalling their own experience with triggers.

Kyla Bender-Baird, instructor of Sociology at City College of New York, is an example of an educator whose experience as an undergraduate shape her own support of

\textsuperscript{51} Classroom decorum was defined earlier in the chapter as adhering to conventional standards in effort to maintain proper behavior within an established context. Here Johnston extends that classroom material should challenge students but should not re-traumatize a student because the educator did not adhere to decorum.

\textsuperscript{52} Caroline Heldman, quoted in Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings.”

\textsuperscript{53} Caroline Heldman, quoted in Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings.”
trigger warnings. Bender-Baird vividly recalls taking a class in gender studies where the visiting professor shared an intense 911 call reporting a sexual assault with the class without any contextual framing. Despite an apology the following class period, Bender-Baird did not feel an after-the-fact apology effectively accounted for students who left their classroom in a traumatized daze. Both Heldman and Bender-Baird explain that personal experience influenced their understanding and adoption of trigger warnings, demonstrating the intricate links between teacher and student, and how experiences as a student often shape engagement in the classroom as an instructor. At the same time, throughout my research, I found that the most common justification for trigger warning adoption came from witnessing how traumatic material within the classroom can disrupt learning objectives. In effort to better understand the complexity present during these ruptures of classroom decorum, it is important to honor the rhetorical power of trauma-laden material.

Trigger warnings symbolically honor the presence and power of trauma. This becomes vital as often it is the act of objectification that justifies sexual assault. The victim is no longer seen as a holistic person but instead is a sexualized object. Carol J. Adams offers her articulation of the “absent referent” as a key to better understand the systemic causes of sexual assault. The “absent referent” reduces the victim down to a source of sexual consumption, abuse, and exploitation. For example, focusing an assault

54 Kyla Bender-Baird is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center.

55 See Kyla Bender-Baird, quoted in Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings” for a more in-depth account of Bender-Baird’s experience with trigger warnings in the classroom.

case on what the victim was wearing, or past sexual experiences reduces the victim down to a piece of evidence as opposed to a person. Adams suggests if we are to respond to rape culture, we must reaffirm a survivor’s personhood to transform the “absent referent” into agency. This is where trigger warnings come in to play, as they allow the survivor to orient towards how they will experience traumatic material. For survivors of assault, trigger warnings function as a mode of consent because they provide a space where survivors can choose how to engage, rather than being forced into a traumatic encounter simply because someone else has the power to control the narrative.

Maddy Cunningham more specifically addresses how trauma should be addressed and honored within the classroom. Cunningham suggests that classroom exposure to traumatic material may cause students to experience vicarious traumatization - the affective response to traumatic material may be difficult for some individuals to process as they are experiencing a residual trauma. As such, Cunningham continues by suggesting that framing traumatic material before student exposure is as important as debriefing following the material. These measures help to account not only for the cognitive processing within the classroom but also takes into account the role affect can play in a student’s ability to interact and understand material. Ann Berlak reminds educators that academia is often oppressive in nature. Therefore, adopting anti-oppressive pedagogy is key to holistic learning that accounts for both emotional and cognitive


59 Cunningham, "Teaching Social Workers about Trauma," 315.
Based on these observations, trigger warnings serve as a tool to acknowledge and integrate the power of affect within the classroom through providing narrative control to those who might suffer residual trauma. Rather than waiting until after the trauma has been experienced, again, trigger warnings allow orientation towards trauma in a unique way that provides space for processing emotion.

Law professor Jeannie Suk asserts that individuals are so nervous about addressing sexual assault because of “the sense among the public that frank discussions of sexual assault equate to some kind of ‘second rape,’ or public retraumatization.” I contend that this concern is well-founded. The primary purpose of trigger warnings should be avoiding the impacts of what I call “second assaults.” Rhetorical in their very nature, second assaults occur when an individual is blindsided by content related to a person’s individualized trauma. In the case of second assaults in the university classroom, the course material triggers the student to focus more on their internalized affective memory than the course content. Arguably, second assaults disrupt classroom decorum and student learning by calling the trauma into being. To shield against second assaults, proponents of trigger warnings believe that by labeling traumatic texts, we socially reduce emotional harm that is closely tied to PTSD. Additionally, as educators we must account for how PTSD can influence both the classroom decorum and learning objectives.

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62 Second assaults occur when individuals are re-traumatized by material that relates to a personal experience of trauma.
Jeet Heer notes that today’s students are products of a post-9/11, War on Terror mentality thus, “PTSD is, in a crucial sense, a theory of memory: It posits that for certain people the memory of a trauma always exists, lying just below the surface.” Based on this acknowledgement, PTSD now becomes a cultural marker as well as an individualized experience. In turn, Heer explains that understanding trauma as a cultural phenomenon will hopefully “naturally lead to a heightened vigilance” of addressing trauma with an ethic of care. This pivot of perspective affords educators a tool for intervention regarding our violent histories, specifically addressing a complex variation to PTSD, transgenerational trauma. Transgenerational trauma is a result of communal violence that is passed down through retelling historical accounts. Thus, transgenerational trauma influences critical pedagogy.

Malcolm Harris argues that the real problem concerning trauma in the classroom is the Western canon itself. Harris questions “Why should students have to endure gender- and race-based contempt from their required reading list?” In this sense, trigger warnings allow for both the student and educator to account for historical trauma instead of continuing the practice of erasure. Now that I have outlined how <protection> is mobilized as a key ideograph by both sides of the debate, it is important to turn to how power is negotiated within this discussion.

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63 Heer, “Generation PTSD.”

64 Heer, “Generation PTSD.”

4.5 Pursuing Power Within the Classroom

In conjunction with the outlined ideographs, language has additional implications for how power is negotiated within these environments. As noted in chapter two, Foucault envisioned school systems as disciplinary institutions. In this section, I examine each side of the trigger warning debate through three key reiterations of power: (1) power is not a thing but a relationship between things as power is omnipresent at every level of the social body; (2) power is not simply repressive; it can also be productive, and (3) the exercise of power is strategic and war-like. These three tenets can help us understand how those that oppose the use of trigger warnings negotiate the nuances of power.

Trigger warning tensions occur within competing visions of higher education. The power that spurs from trigger warning resistance may be the justification behind anchoring within academic freedom and in some cases privileging the educator over the student. This positioning allows opponents to continue a vision of education as both the public and institution reifies and respects academic freedom as a foundation within the academy. Thus, opponents utilize the understood power of academic freedom to combat

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68 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 100-1.


70 Academic Association of University Professors, “Academic Freedom of Students and Professors, and Political Discrimination,” AAUP accessed July 8, 2017, https://www.aaup.org/academic-freedom-students-and-professors-and-political-discrimination. The AAUP explains, “The academic freedom of individual professors is a longstanding concept, with its roots in the nineteenth century. It is both a professional standard and a legal definition. The professional standard of academic freedom is tied to custom and practice, and to the ideal environment for freedom of thought, inquiry and teaching. The legal definition is related to the professional definition but with its own framework and rules. It involves both elements of
the new and unknown practices of trigger warnings. This positionality benefits both opponents and the established institutions, as colleges across the nation are negotiating the tensions between Title IX violations and the inclusions of trigger warnings in the classroom. There is a shared ground of accounting for trauma within these tensions.

Noting a moment of social struggle and erosion of <protection>, director Kirby Dick unveiled *The Hunting Ground* at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival. Billed as a “piercing, monumental expose of rape culture on campuses,” the documentary urges the academic community as well as the community at large to reassess its silence on the issue. It has been my argument throughout that an added advantage to adopting the use of trigger warnings comes from the ability trigger warnings have to make visible moments of rape culture preserved within academic canons and material. Thus, an unintended consequence of rejecting trigger warnings may include missing an opportunity to acknowledge the sexual assault plague impacting college campuses. By this I mean that the use of trigger warnings within course material not only accounts for how sexual assault trauma has been preserved within the Western canon but also provides an opportunity for those within academe to open a space to account for present day rape culture. The legitimacy of this advocacy is Burkean in nature as naming brings our attention to a phenomenon. For example, as an instructor, I use trigger warnings to create a space for my class to talk about the way society addresses rape both on campus and constitutional and contract law and reflects an attempt to reconcile basic constitutional principles with prevailing views of academic freedom’s social and intellectual role in American life.”

within the media. In this instance, trigger warnings serve as the entry into a discussion about consent and reporting options.

I suggest that <protection> of academic freedom can further mask the sexual assault epidemic, prioritizing the protection of the institution over the protection of all individuals involved. Foucault pointed to a new kind of ‘disciplinary power’ that could be observed within defending the academic institution. Systems of surveillance and assessment “no longer require force or violence, as people learned to discipline themselves and behave in expected ways…if individuals become anesthetized to trauma, we normalize it.”72 Because power itself is not an entity but an omnipresent influence over behavior, we must examine how power is not simply a tool of repression but also a tool of production.

Discourse can be a site of both power and resistance, with scope to “evade, subvert or contest strategies of power.”73 The concept of power has a transformative function within the trigger warning debate as it intertwines with <protection>. In this sense, power is arguably utilized to subvert responsibility of replicating violence away from the institution and educator. This is not to say that the root of sexual violence is the academy. However, the academy is one site that can replicate microaggressions of violence that may aid the insidious trauma present within rape culture. This happens on two fronts: course material and second assaults. Regarding course material, if the instructor does not account for the violence that has been preserved within the western canon of education, students continue to learn from these acts of violence in a way that

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72 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 247.

may normalize violent practices. On the second front, students bring their lived experience into the classroom. Since trauma functions as an invisible disability, educators cannot predict whether a student may experience a “second assault” based on the material. To better explain this tenet of power, I offer the following representative anecdote from my own experience as a student in a graduate seminar. As a student in a special topics class, I watched the film *Half the Sky*, a documentary exposing gender violence across the globe.\(^{74}\) The film was assigned to increase the class’ understanding of the socialization of violence. The instructor asked us to watch the film without framing prior to the screening about what should be expected. In fact, we were to watch the film without her in the room, as she was gone at a conference.

During the film, a male international student became visibly distraught while viewing footage of child prostitution. The student began to sob and explained that most of his family was still in that country. He was thinking about his young sisters and nieces. Despite his loud sobs, the film was not paused. At the end of class, there was no opportunity to discuss the experience or debrief what we should take from the film. Instead, a third of the class left silently with tears still streaming. This anecdote troubles the production of violence that occurs both in the representation of sexual violence within course material and the impact such material may have on students. It underlines the importance of considering the probability of second assaults during the discussion of sexual violence in both the educational and personal arena. The anecdote, however, does not suggest that such material should be avoided altogether. It acknowledges that such material requires framing beforehand and conscientious debriefing afterwards. This is

vital when addressing the socialization of violence and working to dismantle the culture of rape.

The final application of employing power as a strategy within the trigger warning debate may create a damning implication for college campuses. A collective of humanities educators insist that individuals look at the residual danger that may be hidden within the trigger warning debate as the inclusion of trigger warnings “may provide a dangerous illusion that a campus has solved or is systematically addressing its problems with sexual assault, racial aggression, and other forms of campus violence, when, in fact, the opposite may be true.” However, this collective ignores that trigger warnings can operate as a viable tool to resist the propagation of rape culture on college campuses as warnings performatively break the silence surrounding sexual assault. The adoption of trigger warnings may very well be the first step towards treating rape culture as trigger warnings provide homeopathic treatment for trauma. The problem facing trigger warning opposition is the assumption that trigger warnings work allopathically, or the idea that because something is deemed triggering, it will no longer be talked about within the classroom. What they fail to see is that trigger warnings work homeopathically instead, meaning that educators introduce traumatic material while providing advance warning and knowledge of accessible resources throughout campus in case a student experiences a “second assault”. In this case, trigger warnings operate as a form of intervention to inoculate against second assaults as the individual student can assess their ability to engage with the material and do so on their own terms. While power troubles and complicates stances of opponents to trigger warnings, supporters of trigger warnings can also replicate power.

75 Elizabeth Freeman et. al, “Trigger Warnings Are Flawed”.

First, since power is not determined merely through itself, I begin by uncovering the relational aspect between trigger warnings and power. For supporters of trigger warnings, warnings become an integrated piece of pedagogy to not only govern the classroom decorum, but also the introduction of trauma. According to Foucault, governmentality is the “art of governing,” not simply at the level of state politics, as we generally think of it, but the governing of a wide array of objects and persons such as entire populations at the most abstract level and one’s own desires and thoughts at a more micro level. This act of governance influences the academic body by suggesting trigger warnings are the first response against rape culture as trigger warnings simultaneously requires the student to check their own emotional self-care. Seltzer suggests, “trigger warnings, or similar disclaimers, on college syllabi reveal little in the way of coddling, [but] put the onus directly on students to deal with trauma, while acknowledging that professors understand the material might be unpleasant.”

Based on this, trigger warning support can be read as a tool for scapegoating. By this I mean that trigger warning inclusion could be interpreted as the only action required of the academic institution to address the climate of the sexual assault epidemic. Here trigger warnings shift the responsibility of addressing rape culture from an institutional burden to an individualized burden as the student faces their personalized processing of sexual assault trauma. Trigger warnings instill students with the agency and responsibility of protecting themselves from “second assaults” or at least reducing the reoccurrence of traumatization. As such, individuals that support trigger warning use within the classroom should also remain transparent to the limitations within this pedagogical tool.

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76 Seltzer, “Teaching Trigger Warnings”
Since power does not operate within a vacuum, it is necessary to see how implementation of trigger warnings may impact the academy. While I argue that trigger warnings are a first step to respond to rape culture, there is a danger that they may be taken as a cure for the role assault plays on college campuses. Foucault explains, “discursive practice defines what is normal, acceptable, deviant, etc. — but it is a discursive practice that is nonetheless in constant flux.”\(^7^7\) Based on the instability of discursive practices and the multiple ways an educator can employ trigger warnings, supporters of trigger warnings cannot afford to become lackadaisical in their advocacy or protection of student safety. Instead, it is important to note trigger warnings should not be the only discursive pivot taken by the academy to respond to sexual violence.

To consider that the exercise of power is strategic, this analysis warns trigger warnings cannot solve the issue of trauma but instead can only influence how one responds to trauma. In this sense, “the ‘battle for truth’ is not for some absolute truth that can be discovered and accepted, but is a battle about ‘the rules,’ the true and false are separated and specific effects of power are attached to the true.”\(^7^8\) As this section of the chapter focused on tracing the lines of power within the trigger warning debate, it becomes essential to bring attention the interdependent nature of knowledge and power within a Foucauldian framework. Foucault refutes the idea that he makes the claim 'knowledge is power' and says that he is interested in studying the complex relations between power and knowledge without saying they are the same thing. Based on this separation, I offer an autoethnographic account of trigger warning use in the next chapter.

\(^7^7\) Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1984), 116.

\(^7^8\) Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 208.
to examine both the potential and limitations of implementing trigger warning use in the classroom. Additionally, it is important to account for the embodied experiences of second assaults. As a sexual assault survivor and advocate, I believe utilizing autoethnography as a tool allows for an ethical exploration of incorporating trigger warnings into pedagogy. Kristin M. Langellier notes, “Personal narrative performance gives shape to social relations, it can do so only in unstable and destabilizing ways for narrator and audience . . . a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete.”

Personal narratives not only put a face on cultural conflict, but also to create a space for those involved to breathe authentic reaction and interaction.

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CHAPTER FIVE
Accounting for Trauma – A Guide for Trigger Warning Adoption in Academia

After analyzing the trigger warning debate between January 2014 to June 2015, there seems to be one overarching agreement from many of the academic institutions involved: the adoption of trigger warnings should be negotiated on an individual level.¹ In other words, the educator should determine if trigger warnings are adopted as praxis within their classroom. I write this chapter oscillating between educator and survivor – as both one who could inflict a second assault, and one who has experienced them. I pivot to a more autoethnographic style to acknowledge the role affect plays within this debate. While chapter four focused on each side of the debate, this chapter is rooted in the possibility of social justice intervention as outlined in CCP. Furthermore, an autoethnographic approach is preferable to other methods of accessing research on this topic. For example, one research barrier is that one cannot recruit individuals to share their personal narratives within qualitative interviews without the risk of re-traumatizing the individual. This chapter serves as a guide for evaluating various pedagogical options available for implementing trigger warnings into the classroom. I begin with my own experience of trigger warnings within academia.

5.2 Bearing Witness – Negotiating Trigger Warnings and Trauma

TW: Includes reference to my sexual assault and PTSD responses.²


² I place a trigger warning before the autoethnography section of this chapter to take ownership of my own critique. Section 5.1 explains why I choose to utilize trigger warnings in the classroom. Additionally, after
I was first introduced to trigger warnings in 2002, when my undergraduate professor told the class he would be showing *The Accused*, a film containing a graphic assault scene. The instructor offered that anyone who would not feel comfortable seeing the attack could do an alternative assignment and not come to class. As a blooming feminist, I did not go to class, but not in fear that I would be emotionally triggered by the film. Instead, I wanted to take a stance about showing the victimization of female bodies. Because of my own actions as an undergraduate student, I understand the initial concern of educators that students will just ‘check-out’ from assignments; however, I completed the alternative assignment given to me by the instructor to fulfill for class attendance that day, so I still engaged with the material.

Two years later (during the summer of 2004), I experienced a hate crime that included assault. I spent several months trying to put my life back together. If I am being honest, my primary coping mechanisms were self-blame and denial. I was not openly out as a queer person so even if I could account for the sexual assault, I was not in the position to share the added violence of the assault being a hate crime. My queer body was assaulted in the name of “fucking me straight” and this would require a double outing for both my experienced trauma as well as coming out as queer. I was afraid to tell others about the assault for fear they would ask what I had done to cause it to happen. This was the way I had witnessed society deal with sexual assault. As Andrea L. Roberts et al. note in the *American Journal of Public Health*, “LGBT people experience violence and PTSD reading trigger warnings within the blogosphere a primary concern I have is the author providing the trigger warning but then immediately exposing the trauma. This does not give the reader adequate time to prepare mentally for engagement if needed. As such, I have intentionally left space so that readers can choose whether to engage with this section or advance to 5.2 in the chapter.
at higher rates than the general population.” My story reflects this statistic, and I was hiding a wound within my own silence and occupying an invisible minority position as a trauma survivor. In her book, *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*, Belleruth Naparstek contends that invisible disabilities, such as PTSD, need to be handled with care and attention to avoid re-traumatizing the individual. As educators, we need to exercise the same amount of care towards students impacted by trauma as we would engage with any other disability within the classroom.

After struggling through this ordeal in my Master’s program, I was invited back to my alma mater in 2007 to help with a speech and debate tournament. While judging a final round of poetry interpretation, my life would be changed again in ten minutes. A student stood before the room with a small black binder filled stories of other bodies that had been marked by hate crimes within the queer community. He asserted within his introduction that violence towards LGBTQ bodies happens daily, although these acts of violence often do not receive media attention. While listening to the performance, I began to hyperventilate as I thought back to my assault. I again felt like I would not feel safe in my own skin. I finished judging the round in a daze because flashbacks have always felt like an out of body experience for me. Scholars like Eve Sedgwick might label my experience as an extension of reparative reading. Following this moment, I began to not

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only think about the importance of trigger warnings, but also how captive audiences (like a classroom) can face a sense of “second assault” based on experienced trauma.

Following coverage of Oberlin College’s negotiations concerning the role of trigger warnings, I entered the Fall 2014 semester as an educator intent on implementing trigger warnings on a variety of levels in my classroom. I created alternative assignments for lectures that had the potential to be triggering. My syllabi included a section regarding both the justification and use of trigger warnings within the classroom. I diligently offered advanced trigger warnings prior to class sessions that may trigger students to prevent a forced outing for those currently unable to process potential trauma and provide time for them to prepare for the material. In the summer of 2017, my understanding of trigger warnings shifted once again as I realized even though I had been utilizing trigger warnings within my own classroom for three years, there was a blind spot within my own praxis: I had not accounted for how trigger warnings may aid educators as well.

During an assignment in my Introduction to Communication class, students were asked to establish and support their own life philosophy. One student’s submission disclosed they had survived multiple assaults. Their depiction of the trauma was rather graphic in nature. As I was reading the paper, I noticed my chest and throat tighten. I also noticed that my breathing sped up. I stepped away from my computer realizing that I had been triggered by the student’s graphic narrative. While I have argued that one should view the classroom as a co-constructed space, I had ignored asking students to also utilize trigger warnings if needed within their assignments. I began requesting that students use content notes or trigger warnings in written assignments in Fall 2017. Noting the
existence of invisible minorities, whether students or educators, within our classrooms calls for pedagogical action.

Meredith Raimondo, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Oberlin College, suggests that the debate surrounding trigger warning inclusion in the classroom can simultaneously support academic freedom and support trauma survivors. She argues, “We do not see these as contradictory projects, but rather that both are necessary to create an appropriately challenging and effective learning environment.”

The way that I propose supporting academic freedom and trauma survivors and thus protection across the spectrum is adopting trigger warnings within classroom praxis. To build upon the middle ground that Raimondo and others have created, this chapter examines the intersection between knowledge praxis and power. I then develop the pedagogical concept of “invitational welfare” to justify how trigger warnings are a valid tool within the rhetorical tradition. Finally, I offer examples of “invitational welfare” for educators and others negotiating potentially triggering rhetorical situations.

5.3 Power and Knowledge

To understand knowledge through a Foucauldian lens, it is necessary to explore how individualized practices are weighed against socialized normalization. Individual behaviors that are deviant from the norm are disciplined. This analysis explains the motivation behind scapegoating, in the case of assault the scapegoating often takes the form of victim blaming. Burke suggests the guilt/redemption cycle unfolds with

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predictable stages: hierarchy, the negative, victimage, and redemption. Order, or the social hierarchy is born out of discourse. Language serves as a tool to establish oneself within the hierarchy based on categorizing speech acts and performances as inferior, superior, or neutral in comparison to socially normalized standards. The negative stage can be understood as the individual recognizing their assigned place within the social hierarchy and rejecting it. As humans, we are dissatisfied when the real is not an accurate reflection of the socialized ideal. To resolve the dissonance created within the individual, victimage through scapegoating occurs to protect and reaffirm the hierarchy. Individuals seen as inferior within the hierarchy are more likely to have trouble accomplishing absolution. This is because their dissatisfaction is often systemic, so the system becomes the scapegoat as opposed to a person. As such, redemption is the final step of purification. The key to redemption is either submitting to the original hierarchy or pursuing a new status quo. Now that I have outlined how the guilt/redemption cycle functions, I first conceptualize how opponents of trigger warnings have utilized this cycle as a tool for sense making and rejection.

As outlined in chapter three, opponents to trigger warnings often take up a protective stance to preserve the institution’s ability to discipline bodies. The order has been disrupted as students have tried to equalize their subject position to educators as

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opposed to being placed within an inferior subject position. Attempts to centralize student concerns disrupt what Freire calls the “banking model of education” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this metaphor, the educator is positioned within an active subject position whereas the student is placed in a passive role. The “banking” concept of education is not focused on co-construction, instead the educator makes knowledge deposits for students to receive, memorize, and repeat. More recently, Nate Kreuter, assistant professor of English at Western Carolina University, has argued that the consumer model of education “is premised upon unsustainable growth and unsecured debt, and government abandonment of its responsibilities, is the human equivalent of strip-mining.” These metaphors reflect how academe attempts to reify institutional power on multiple fronts. In both the trigger warning conversation and discussions of the student-as-consumer model, the academic institution is positioned as the student’s best advocate.

The most common practice of victimage within the debate is rooted in blaming student fragility. This typically involves *ad hominem* attacks labeling students as “coddled” or “snowflakes” instead of addressing the potential impact trauma has within the academic institution. Queer theorist Jack Halberstam believes that trigger warning support is tied to the social “re-emergence of a rhetoric of harm and trauma.”

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Halberstam continues to say that the real function of trigger warnings is to establish “hierarchies of woundedness” by dissecting social difference in the terms of trauma and pitting potential allies against one another. Halberstam rejects trigger warnings by insinuating educational values are hindered in the name of political correctness. In my view, this position questions the credibility of the student as well as the legitimacy of trigger warning pedagogy. Consequently, opponents justify rejecting trigger warnings in the name of “better preparing students for the ‘real’ world”; this fulfills redemption and reifies the legitimacy of the academic institution to continue operations as usual.

Ideologically, it is difficult for me not to interpret this line of reasoning as victim blaming. Instead of asking “What were they wearing?” or “Were they drinking?” attacks on student fragility sound like, “Just breathe, snowflake” and “College is a coddle-free zone, baby.” Based on infantilizing the students and delegitimizing trauma, the academic institution successfully fulfills the redemption cycle. I now break down how advocates of trigger warnings utilize the guilt/redemption cycle within the debate.

16 Halberstam, “You are Triggering Me”

17 While Halberstam has stated that his initial post regarding trigger warnings was meant to serve as a precaution regarding “where is the line?” in trigger warning usage, Halberstam’s original positioning has become a battle cry for many trigger warning opponents. My overall concern within this section is individuals that continue to demonize the use and effectiveness of trigger warnings by utilizing Halberstam’s original words. See Lisa Duggan, “On Trauma and Trigger Warnings,” Bully Bloggers, November 23, 2014, accessed January 19, 2017, https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/11/23/on-trauma-and-trigger-warnings-in-three-parts/.

As stated earlier, individuals that are placed in an inferior position within the hierarchy may turn to a critical evaluation of the institution. Advocates for trigger warnings address how the current academic order is preserved through privilege. All teaching institutions are made to maintain a certain social class in power; and to exclude the instruments of power of another social class. This critique of privilege is legitimized when opponents try to minimalize or ignore the presence of trauma within the classroom. The status quo of the academic institution contends rational development should be preferred over affect reactions. This established order requires both educators and students to compartmentalize trauma responses in the name of exposure to some class material. Since the hierarchy is constructed and supported by discourse, a critical lens can identify the modern era in rhetoric as a turning point in education.

The academy, much like modern theorists, strives to create a chasm between logic and emotion. This division allows knowledge to be anchored to rational development without having to pay consideration to affective implications. In her work to recover affect in education practices, Megan Boler suggests that emotions and affect have been exorcised from the academy. Boler notes educators should not ignore affect within higher education as the classroom serves as a meaningful location of social and political struggle. Boler asserts affect serves as a tool of resistance and empowerment within a control society. Since the institution has a long history of rhetorical justification, steps toward victimage is a bit more nuanced as the scapegoat is an ideology instead of a

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person. Therefore, advocates question the disciplining role of education and in this case triggering potential of maintaining the status quo.

One possible in-road for this critique is targeting academic freedom. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it.\textsuperscript{21} Within the contemporary academy, one can see how academic freedom, originally an abstract concept, has been reified into a concrete and real protective standard for educators. Claire Potter, a Professor of History notes, “Faculty are, in fact, perceived as having an almost uniquely destructive power to harm their students intellectually by forcing their views on them.”\textsuperscript{22} In this case, academic freedom can be viewed as a tool of coercion instead of a tool of protection.

By exposing the coercive nature of the institution, advocates hope individuals will choose to offer trigger warnings to account for the presence of affect in the classroom. The juxtaposition in how opponents and advocates filter through the guilt/redemption cycle uncovers an interesting aspect of this debate: circular reasoning. The above analysis exposes both sides are engaging in circular reasoning to maintain power-knowledge. Foucault explains that "by being combined and generalized, they attained a level at which the formation of knowledge and the increase in power regularly reinforce one another in a circular process."\textsuperscript{23} The relationship between power and knowledge may indeed be why the trigger warning debate quickly became adversarial between educator rights and


student rights. Specifically, reasoning within this debate is often circular in nature as individuals are trying to identify who should have the locus of power within this conflict and who should resist subjugation and disciplining. As power is most often critiqued during acts of disciplining, utilizing rhetoric to rupture the cyclical reasoning may be key in accessing resistance. This also speaks to how power is re-entrenched.

Foucault and Burke both agree that discourse constructs both our understanding and our reality. Foucault connects this to knowledge production by explaining, “Knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, ‘becomes true.’ Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice.”24 The circular rhetoric around assault is the key reason we live in a society that continues to be saturated in rape culture. Since the university has been identified as an assault “hunting ground,” institutions desperately need a response to rape culture.25 Considering trauma acts as an invisible participant within the classroom when it becomes imperative to issue an educational response to address the probability and impact of second assaults. Additionally, as knowledge praxis reifies “truth,” trigger warnings can engage two fronts of resistance: a verbal reminder about the presence of trauma within the classroom and a tool of resistance against the insidious nature of rape culture. I now outline a pedagogical framework to account for affect in the classroom.

24 Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 27.

5.4 Invitational Welfare

Rhetoric and communication scholars have a rich history when it comes to producing literature that addresses the ethical responsibilities of the speaker by re-orienting the goals and practices of communication engagement. Foss and Griffin extend the call of ethics to include invitational rhetoric as an alternative to the Aristotelian tradition. This view of rhetoric draws on Burkean foundations to offer an alternative to persuasion, a framework aimed to restore audience agency or choice. Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud critique with the framework of invitational rhetoric but acknowledge that an invitational approach can be possible and appropriate within pedagogical situations. Krista Ratcliffe offers rhetorical listening as an instructive methodology to utilize invitational rhetoric within the classroom. She posits rhetorical listening as a performance that should increase one’s understanding of self and cultural difference.

By transforming listening from a passive stance to an active engagement, Ratcliffe details how rhetorical listening operates in the following positions: an open stance of “responsibility logic” (as opposed to a defensive stance of “guilt/blame”); a

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28 Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud, “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” Western Journal of Communication 73 (2009): 220-226. Their major criticism is that invitational rhetoric is a theoretical concept that does not have a clear application process to adopt an invitational stance. Additionally, that invitational rhetoric assumes equal subject positioning. I engage these critiques within invitational welfare by offering several options for application and continuously stressing the importance of seeing education as a co-constructed environment.

requirement for the listener to observe both “commonalities and differences;” a dedication to rooting “commonalities and differences” into cultural logics. Clearly, this concept places the onus of listening on the individual, as each person comes from an array of cultural and social experiences. Ratcliffe sees rhetorical listening as “collaps[ing] the real/ideal dichotomy into a third ground where rhetorical negotiation is exposed as always already existing and where rhetorical listening is posited as one means of that negotiation.” The real is rooted in applied action and behavior; whereas the ideal is often used to classify theoretical lenses within academia. Therefore, the third ground would come from the intersecting of the two: opening a space for embodied experience and empathetic understanding. Since the communication discipline is becoming more invested in research engaging health and well-being, concepts of invitational rhetoric and rhetorical listening can demonstrate an effort to further outline a pedagogical response to trauma. Thinking about invitational rhetoric and rhetorical listening together with trauma in the classroom allows me to transform these concepts from theoretical ideals into applied praxis. Additionally, Ratcliffe’s third space does not account for potential for “second assaults” within the classroom. Thus, this research gap evokes the need for a pedagogical response.


31 Ratcliffe, "Rhetorical Listening: A Trope for Interpretive Invention and a ‘Code of Cross-Cultural Conduct’," 205 emphasis added.

Drawing from invitational rhetoric and rhetorical listening, I develop the idea of “invitational welfare” as a pedagogical style an educator can employ to attempt to reduce the occurrence of second assaults. “Invitational welfare” encourages the educator/rhetor to consider how to protect the well-being of their students. Like Foss and Griffin’s invitational rhetoric, “invitational welfare” embraces core values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. In practice, invitational welfare takes a resistive stance against the potential of disciplining a body marked by trauma. Following Foucault, it sees power as horizontal—a consistent tug-of-war between disciplining and resisting. The pedagogical choice to be concerned with invitational welfare highlights the interdependence between the educator and students’ classroom discussion. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the classroom can be transformed from a captive environment to a co-constructed space. This pedagogical shift embraces and encourages equity among educators and students. Invitational welfare also actively engages the pedagogical commitments outlined in critical communication pedagogy. Specifically, invitational welfare considers language constitutes an individual’s identification not only through language uses but also takes into regard how an individual may identify with trauma laden rhetoric. Because of this it is important for scholars utilizing invitational rhetoric to acknowledge that not only is power inevitable, but this power is often reified into larger social structure systems like rape culture. In this sense, invitational welfare reaffirms towards Novak and Bonine as the authors worked toward establishing how invitational rhetoric functions in the classroom.

33 James Arnt Aune, “Democratic Style and Ideological Containment,” Rhetoric & Public Affairs 11 (2008): 482. Aune explains style strives to “arouse physical and emotional responses in an audience and then exploit those responses to maintain or change the current distribution of power.”

34 I understand that culturally, welfare functions as a loaded term where opponents assert that recipients of welfare are often regarded as “less than.” I strategically take ownership of the rhetorical baggage surrounding welfare, suggesting similar stigmas are inscribed upon trauma-marked bodies.
critical communication pedagogy’s commitment to view both pedagogy and research as praxis within the classroom.

Invitational welfare is rooted both in pedagogy and politics to address and respond to rape culture while preserving a safe environment for all involved. Invitational welfare utilizes trigger warnings as a mode of pedagogical choice wherein both the educator and the audience can choose to engage in potential rhetorical endangerment or protect their own well-being. Below I outline five options educators can utilize to anticipate and account for the possibility of second assaults. This is meant to be a guide to pedagogical choices about how to create and maintain invitational welfare in the classroom.

5.5 Suggestions for Supporting Trigger Warning Inclusion

Throughout my analysis and indexing of the trigger warning debate, I discovered that there was a common thread of experience uniting various factions both for and against trigger warning inclusion. Supporters fell into two categories: they either embodied the invisible minority status and had been triggered in a captive environment, or they had a teaching experience where they triggered a student. Based upon these unifying experiences, I offer the following guide for praxis consideration. Throughout this section, I evaluate the strengths and drawbacks of each option from both an educator and survivor perspective.
5.5.1 Accommodations through Student Services

The first option educators have is a rather passive one: do nothing. Some educators assert trigger warnings are redundant, as PTSD is already covered by the college’s services for students with disabilities. As most colleges mandate a statement regarding student accommodations, individuals feel the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) statement on syllabi is a satisfactory response to trigger warning inclusion. A collective of humanities educators explain, “students and faculty deserve to have effective resources provided by independent campus offices that handle documentation, certification, and accommodation plans rather than by faculty proceeding on an ad hoc basis.”35 While the collective is trying to suggest other facilities on campus may have more expertise on handling PTSD, this option suggests that, to maintain consistency within and between student accommodations, trauma should be handled in the same generalized fashion as any other accommodation need. Additionally, the use of “effective resources” implicitly suggests that instructors are not equipped with the proper tools to provide accommodations for trauma. While I agree that an ethic of care should be maintained when utilizing trigger warnings, I wonder if students realize the variety of accommodations provided by student services. In fact, after teaching for eight years, I had not considered trigger warnings and PTSD as being imbedded within the ADA statement until I started trigger warning research. Based on that, educators would need to explicitly outline that trigger warnings and PTSD are part of accommodation options so that students learn where they can turn for support.

Advantages to this strategy come not only from the established infrastructure of accommodations within colleges, but also this option serves as a unified approach to trigger warnings across the campus. To qualify for student services, a student may be asked to provide medical documentation in support of the accommodation request. Unfortunately, the medical documentation for PTSD may serve as a costly barrier for students seeking support. The largest barrier to this approach is that some students do not having access to testing centers or the fiscal means to afford testing.\textsuperscript{36} In addition, this strategy relies on a student outing themselves on two fronts: as a trauma survivor, and as a special needs student. Relying on accommodations to solve the issue of trigger warnings becomes even less likely considering 63\% of students who used accommodations in high school avoid registering with Student Services at the university level based on perceived stigmatization.\textsuperscript{37} For me, asking for accommodations in graduate school felt \textit{extremely} threatening to my intellectual worth, so much so that I only requested accommodations during my comprehensive exams to account for my learning disorders. As a student, I did not approach faculty concerning PTSD accommodations despite having a confirmed diagnosis and documentation. My silence stems from the stigma attached to PTSD and the academic ridicule surrounding trigger warnings. I understand my individual experience is not predictive, but my perspective can help serve as insight. Now that I have outlined how student services could be utilized in trigger


warning support, I will detail the choice of including trigger warnings in class and/or within the syllabus.

5.5.2 Issuing Trigger Warnings within Class

Educators typically agree that the syllabus acts as a contract between the instructor and students regarding expectations and course content. Establishing trigger warnings in class or within the syllabus takes on a more active engagement with trigger warning praxis. This is the strategy I most often use as an educator. Within my syllabi, I have a section discussing trigger warning usage in class. This section immediately follows information about Title IX resources and reporting guidelines. I transition between the two policies by explaining some material and discussions within my class will focus on difficult dialogues that have the potential to be triggering if not handled with care. The section below is included within all my syllabi.

**Trigger Warnings:** Discussions regarding safe space and trigger warnings are robust within the academic world. I will use trigger warnings throughout the semester as a method of maintaining a safe and productive classroom. As an advocate, trigger warnings help provide our learning community with an advanced directive of how trauma will be addressed and notes the increased care required for potentially traumatic discussions. To maintain decorum within the classroom and course material, I have marked material that has the potential to trigger PTSD symptoms related to assault. You will find an asterisk beside readings and I will offer a warning the class before we engage the material to avoid outing students that have experienced trauma. Additionally, if you need to opt out of a class session, please contact me in advance so that I can give you an alternative assignment. Please feel free to talk about trigger warning usage further with me one on one. It is vital to note trigger warnings are not a substitute for mental healthcare and well-being. If you need guidance in garnering healthcare support for trauma, please contact our university health center [insert the specific contact information for your institution].

I utilize this option to introduce trigger warnings in my classroom as I believe it not only opens a channel to discuss trauma, but also advises students of potential support options
they have available at the university. If a student does not feel that they can safely engage
with the material, I offer substitute assignments. I see this as an alternative method of
engaging material instead of asking student checking out completely on the topic. A
shortcoming of this practice is Jack Halberstam’s point that trigger warnings create a
suffering hierarchy. I only use trigger warnings in conjunction with material centered on
military trauma or sexual assault trauma, this is, admittedly, not a universal standard.
However, Angela Shaw-Thornburg, associate professor of English at South Carolina
State University, reminds critics, “Language is powerful, images even more so. A word
or an image is as capable of triggering hurt or delivering violence as a fired gun.”

Given the power associated with “second assaults,” I see this as an expression of student
wellness, not a defense of student fragility.

Others might point to two possible drawbacks to the method: having trigger
warnings “in name only” in the syllabus, yet not incorporated within classroom practice
and outing students impacted by trauma. As I am entering my twelfth year of teaching, I
know there are sections of syllabi that create uniformity but are rarely engaged after
initially discussing the syllabi. Trigger warnings require forethought to maintain proper
use and should remain as an active praxis that is consistently applied throughout the
semester. Additionally, there is a clear drawback in delivering trigger warnings in the
moment, as this does not give the class and/or the student adequate time to prepare for the
material. If a student is concerned about experiencing a response tied to PTSD symptoms,
they must now “out” themselves to the class when they leave. Outing someone is harmful
as it violates basic privacy concerns. Individuals who are outed may “feel blindsided and

38 Angela Shaw-Thornburg, “This is a Trigger Warning,” The Chronicle of Higher Education, June 16,
forced to reveal a deeply personal part of their identity without their consent and under someone else’s terms.”\textsuperscript{39} The Victim Rights Law Center notes “outing” a survivor of sexual assault is detrimental to the survivor’s health especially when one considers the fact that sexual assaults remain underreported.\textsuperscript{40} By outing a student in class, decorum has been ruptured and the classroom is no longer seen as safe. Educators can address traumatic course material by coupling trigger warnings with debriefing and support.

\subsection*{5.5.3 Debriefing and Support}

Rooted within creative arts therapy, debriefing occurs immediately following discussion of the traumatic material. Debriefing should occur while the material is still fresh as opposed to taken up in a sequential class. Throughout debriefing, the classroom atmosphere should remain open, flexible, and supportive of student needs.\textsuperscript{41} Colby Bruno, senior legal counsel at the Victim Rights Law Center, notes, “discussions of rape in classes of all kinds – not just law – should be accompanied by trigger warnings and an offer for counseling or extra time after class to discuss outstanding issues.”\textsuperscript{42} Linda Caroline Winn suggests that the most effective use of debriefing extends beyond


addressing the specific material, and also incorporates the affect present within the discussion.\footnote{Linda Caroline Winn, \textit{Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Dramatherapy: Treatment and Risk Reduction}, (Bristol: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994), 38.} As noted earlier, I do not expect every educator to be trained in psychology. In fact, debriefing may be best provided by reaching out to other community resources instead of facilitating the debriefing on your own.

There are two distinct advantages to having someone else mediate the debriefing: (1) it helps further delineate the line between educator and therapist; (2) it allows for debriefing to be centered around a specific discussion as opposed to rapport built throughout the semester. It was not uncommon while I was attending classes at University of Nebraska-Lincoln for educators to invite members of PREVENT or the director of the Women’s Center to serve as a liaison within debriefing conversations.\footnote{PREVENT is a student organization at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that trains student advocates to facilitate classroom and/or student organization communication surrounding topics of interpersonal violence, sexual assault and by-stander intervention. Educators can reach out to PREVENT and request that a trained liaison helps foster the use of debriefing strategies following the exposure to triggering material.} These events helped by bringing an expert into the classroom who was trained to handle difficult conversations surrounding assault. Additionally, the invited guest knew what resources were available for students and how to maintain institutional support. A student receiving in-class support is better trained to take advantage of that support in the future, and to advise other students about where they can also access that support. In this way, connecting students to resources on campus can serve as a bridge between the classroom and the social services provided on the campus.

However, there are two potential drawbacks to debriefing: (1) educators may not believe that they have the skills and/or experience to effectively facilitate debrief the class (2) students may not actively engage as they have not formed a bond with the
mediator. I have already discussed how educators might bring in experts to facilitate
difficult and triggering dialogues within the classroom. As a means of supporting an
educator’s skill set some individuals have suggested specialized training courses for
educators aimed at identifying potential traumatic responses. Sarah Roff, assistant
professor of German literature at Princeton University, explains the important role that
training has in responding to trauma on campus:

It would be much more useful for faculty members and students to be trained how to respond if they are concerned that a student or peer has suffered trauma. Students with unusually intense responses to academic cues should be referred to student-health services, where they can be evaluated and receive evidence-based treatments so that they can participate fully in the life of the university.45

In a similar vein, the collective of humanities professors suggest a need for “faculty
development opportunities [which] will enhance our ability to recognize and respond
appropriately to students’ strong emotional reactions to materials that ask them to witness
or analyze violence.”46 The collective says that the onus belongs to the institution as well,
stating, “institutions seriously committed to caring for traumatized students ought to be
directing students, from their first days on campus, to a rich array of mental health
resources.”47 While I agree with their sentiment, students are best-served with multiple
strategies and resources to support mental wellness. Faculty development opportunities
regarding how to discuss traumatic material within the classroom open yet another space


47 See Elizabeth Freeman et al., “Trigger Warnings are Flawed.”
for individuals to discuss the topic of sexual violence on campus. I contend that if faculty are exposed to methods of responding to trauma talk, they can better prepare to be proactive regarding trauma within the classroom. Despite its extensive benefits the practice of debriefing remains under-utilized as a practice. While debriefing relies on educators receiving institutional support and faculty training, educators are using self-efficacy to support one of the most commonly used educational praxis – content notes.

5.5.4 Content Notes

Another option for educators is to use content notes, which occur prior to audience exposure to classroom material as a means of informing the class that the text may contain distressing information. A content note functions similarly to a trigger warning but can also apply to material that may not evoke PTSD reactions. For example, content notes can be used to flag material that discusses systemic oppression; in such cases, an educator may write “content note: colonialism.” Proponents of content notes suggest this change in the nomenclature helps ease confusion, as the origin of “trigger” is embedded in psychological scholarship rather than the classroom. Furthermore, an additional benefit presents itself within a game of semantics as content notes allow individuals to utilize warnings without having the kneejerk resistance. Content notes, yet, have not been the locus of conflict as trigger warnings. As a praxis, content notes label


potential controversial material instead of predicting the student’s affective response.

Angus Johnston, history instructor at Hostos Community College, provides an excerpt from his syllabi in which he has opted to include content notes as a practice of sound pedagogy:

Content Note: At times, this semester we will be discussing historical events that may be disturbing, even traumatizing, to some students. If you ever feel the need to step outside during one of these discussions, either for a short time or for the rest of the class session, you may always do so without academic penalty. (You will, however, be responsible for any material you miss. If you do leave the room for a significant time, please make arrangements to get notes from another student or see me individually.) If you ever wish to discuss your personal reactions to this material, either with the class or with me afterwards, I welcome such discussion as an appropriate part of our coursework.50

As this study frequently acknowledges the power and influence that language choices have, the choice to engage in a less politicized practice of marking traumatic material with content notes offers those who are undecided in the debate a powerful alternative to explicit advocacy. Additionally, content notes allow educators to escape terms laden with violence. “Content notes” eschew violent terms such as trigger that are commonly associated with gun violence.51 The use of content notes shifts the focus from a particular trigger to a larger sense of the rhetorical situation, allowing an increased transparency in the centralized issue as opposed to hiding behind a violent euphemism.

With an increased focus on the issue of sexual assault, it is imperative to address the above noted critique and acknowledge the work “triggering” does within the conversation. Trigger warnings highlight the rhetorical trauma, placing the educator in a


51 Daphne Shaed, "In Search of Lost Time: The Trouble with Trigger Warnings."
position of responsibility, as it is the course material that triggers trauma. By switching
the positionality of trauma responsibility from the student to the educator, it becomes
possible to account for interdependency within the classroom. In this case, the goal is to
establish how traumatic material may alter the learning environment. Considering
rhetorical spaces as co-constructed by both the speaker and audience may cause us to
rethink how we address the idea of triggering material. Arguably, this criticism of the
metaphor is accompanied by one major disadvantage: content notes do not have the same
access to historical and institutional memory regarding trauma treatment. If educators
decide to move toward endorsing content notes over trigger warnings, these educators
actively erase the historical and feminist lineage tied to trigger warnings. Throughout this
project, I have continuously grappled with where to locate myself in this discussion as
both an advocate and survivor. As such, I came to realize that I intend to hold on to the
term “trigger warning” for two reasons: accounting for the violence of sexual assault and
avoiding the erasure of the historic lineage of the term.

As a Burkean scholar, I recognize the power naming has in regard to framing a
rhetorical situation. I also understand the power of rhetoric to not only frame but
influence how one may experience rhetoric. Thus, I reconciled my own battle with this
criticism by acknowledging that trigger warnings are meant to mark violent and traumatic
material; therefore, erasing allusions to violence within issuing/naming these warnings is
most likely counterproductive. Essentially, the use of trigger accounts for the violence
within experiences, like sexual assault, which evoke PTSD symptoms. I argue that critics
wishing to rename trigger warnings as content notes, or other nomenclature, are
participating in a dangerous practice of perspective by incongruity. Burke further
explains, “the notion of perspective by incongruity would suggest that one’s cast out [symbolic] devils by misnaming them.”

While critics may wish to cast out the violence, it is problematic to ignore how this renaming move may aid rape culture by disguising the violence.

Specifically, this may be the most significant critique of those that have decided to utilize content notes to avoid engagement with the trigger warning debate, as this renaming serves as an exorcism by misnomer. Burke continues by explaining that exorcism by misnomer occurs when “one cast out demons by a vocabulary of conversion, by an incongruous naming.”

It is my argument that replacing trigger warnings is an unsuccessful attempt at conversion. Converting trauma into nontraumatic framing hinders our ability to accurately observe and honor the violence experienced by sexual assault survivors. As such, exorcism by misnomer may have limitations in effectiveness especially in a rape culture that depends on denial.

Judith Butler supports this conclusion as she notes, “the problem of injurious speech raises the question of which words wound, which representations offend, suggesting that we focus on those parts of language that are uttered, utterable, and explicit.”

In other words, some terms should not be exorcised of their demons because the demons are necessary to remind us of the horrors of society. It is through maintaining trauma-laden rhetoric that individuals can account for the violence the term represents. This creates what Butler labels as “linguistic survival,” or the type of survival that occurs.


53 Burke, Permanence & Change, 133.

within language.\textsuperscript{55} Because language has the propensity to act in ways that may mirror the infliction of physical pain or injury, the use of \textit{trigger} is a necessary evil in making the trauma both visible and accounted for in a culture that often erases the narratives of sexual assault.

Based on the silence and denial associated with sexual assault, I advocate for the use of trigger warnings as a means of preserving the historical lineage of the term. Trigger warnings originated in the feminist blogosphere as a method to reduce possible affective responses resulting from the sharing of trauma narratives. Finding alternative expressions for the term “trigger warnings” risks not only erasing the linguistic violence, but also erasing the cultural memory connected to PTSD responses. Trigger warning advocates and critics should take heed from the hurdles that have been faced in the medical community regarding the recognition of and treatment for PTSD. Matthew J. Friedman, former executive director of the National Center for PTSD, explains that despite the fact traumatic experiences have always been a part of the human condition, medically we have failed in maintaining a consistent narrative supporting the history of PTSD.\textsuperscript{56} Specifically, frequent nomenclature changes to describe PTSD symptoms (such as “shell shock” and “Gulf War syndrome”) have made it difficult to establish the longevity of PTSD awareness. Lack of awareness means that the medical community has been slow to develop treatment for symptoms that have existed for as long as humans

\textsuperscript{55} Butler, \textit{Excitable Speech}, 4.

have gone to war. I contend the same loss could occur by removing the psychological term of *trigger*: rejecting the use of *trigger* could lead to discursive amnesia.

Discursive amnesia refers to the public or social collective forgetting, downplaying, or decontextualizing an event that may challenge a culture’s actions for the sake of individual well-being.\(^{57}\) Lee and Wander have posited these “specific acts of collective forgetting perpetuate privilege and interest in a particular economic and political context, [as] a group identifies itself not only through what it publicly or officially recalls, but also through what it systematically forgets.”\(^{58}\) Hegemonic patriarchy continues to frame sex as a conquest instead of consent, though this violence is not rhetorically traced. Currently, the privilege of the perpetrator of sexual assault often overrides a survivor’s accusations both socially and legally. By actively engaging in discursive amnesia we risk not only further perpetuating rape culture, but also delegitimizing PTSD diagnosis in association with sexual assault. As noted above the rhetorical erasure of *trigger* has several implications on recognizing the violence associated with sexual assaults. Based on the social trivialization and resistance concerning trigger warnings, it is crucial to reframe how we discuss and outline trauma narratives as playing games of semantics may at best serve as a distraction rather than a practice of advocacy engaging both rape culture and trauma.

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5.5.5 Rating System

While content notes and trigger warnings engage in a game of semantics, other educators attempt to avoid conflict altogether by utilizing a touchstone--the rating system. The rating system as a practice is modeled after the Motion Picture Association of American film (MPAA) rating system. 59 Damien Smith Pfister, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Maryland, uses a rating system within his undergraduate visual rhetoric class. Based on course content, Smith Pfister tells the class that some material will carry an R-Rating, meaning there may be depictions of violence and adult situations. The key advantage of adopting this rating system is the cultural capital associated with the MPAA: both students and faculty are familiar with how the system works. Additionally, there is not a current cultural battle regarding the validity and practice of MPAA ratings; it is believed to already benefit from cultural tolerance. Moreover, it is not unfair to say that individuals are more opened to a rating system instead of a trigger warning. A film professor from an East Coast College shared, “I personally think the movie rating system provides a sufficient trigger warning, but more and more academics are issuing them on the basis that it’s better to be safe than sorry.”60

There are not unique disadvantages to this iteration of trigger warnings as the most common criticism in regarding rating systems are based on the subjectivity of the rater. As an educator who utilizes trigger warnings within the classroom, I know that I am making a judgment call on what degree of trauma warrants a trigger warning. I prefer

59 See complete rating system at http://www.mpaa.org/film-ratings/.

utilizing trigger warnings because of the feminist and medical history outlined above concerning content notes. The largest disadvantage that I see to either content notes or ratings systems is reducing possibly traumatic material into just content. This creates the affective erasure that I have noted is a key issue within the trigger warning debate.

My hope is that in thinking about the five avenues of invitational welfare outlined in this chapter, educators will take a moment to reflect on their own practices and consider adopting tactics that most directly confront rape culture on college campuses. Throughout my analysis of the chosen texts, a frequent question came up: What is the role of the professor and/or university in regard to informing students that difficult material will be present in the classroom? Charles Green, professor of English at Cornell University, complicates the conversation surrounding trigger warning use as he asserts professionalism requires the instructor to prepare students for potential discomforts and challenges that may be present within course material; however, he centers the conversation on a student’s boundaries of experience instead of trauma.\(^\text{61}\) The oscillation between preparing students for discomfort and trigger warnings to mark trauma is very clear in my initial narrative wherein I received my first trigger warning during my undergraduate career. I avoided watching *The Accused* based on personal politics, not trauma. It was not until I experienced a second assault that I even began thinking about trigger warnings. Because of this, I offer the following position: trauma often remains invisible and unmarked until the trauma is *reactivated*.

I construct this section through my own experiences and narratives as I know the risks associated with coming out as a sexual assault survivor. The declaration of

“survivor” marks the body as a point of social disciplining that is justified within our rape culture. The fear of getting rejected or minimalized in disclosing sexual assault may influence the role silence and invisibility play within rape culture. The silence surrounding sexual assault is often covered up through statistics rooted in reporting to authorities. Silence functions on a more personal level regarding whom survivors self-disclose to within their personal networks. Courtney E. Ahrens found that negative reactions to a survivor’s disclosure may lead to a silencing effect, wherein the survivor questions whether future disclosures will be beneficial and refuses to tell anyone else about the incident.62 I personally cannot view self-shame and silence as positive learning outcomes for my students, so, trigger warnings will remain as a practice within my classroom.

At the beginning of this chapter I offered “invitational welfare” as a feminist framework to view the various praxis choices that educators have when engaging with trauma material. Invitational welfare is best achieved when the classroom is transformed from a space of captivity into a co-constructed environment. The acknowledgement that classrooms are co-constructed by a student’s lived experiences and expertise decentralizes the hierarchy of knowledge by expanding the scope of what counts as academic knowledge. Furthermore, this shift helps decentralize power differentials present within traditional knowledge-praxis.

CHAPTER SIX

Heeding the Warning is Half the Battle

This study reflects on and dissects a kairotic moment of tension within the academy. A heated public debate has raged over whether trigger warnings are a legitimate pedagogical tool as universities are being asked to do more to address rape culture.¹ Based on the research in the preceding chapters, two major implications arise from this work: first, the need for advocacy against assault to be multilateral including the entire campus, and secondly, the impetus to avoid “second assaults” within the classroom. While I acknowledge this project focuses on a specific moment purposefully truncated for this study, I would be remiss if I did not argue that this study can expand beyond this specific moment to speak to a more generalized and expansive understanding of the trigger warning debate.

While I have shown why I disagree with critics of trigger warnings, to be successful, proponents of trigger warnings need to ask more general questions about how to get beyond the echo chamber effect of the now-established lines of argument in the trigger warning debate. The previous chapter attempts to do so taking the first steps to create a guide designed to reimagine the possibilities and capabilities educators have available to respond to the violence and trauma that have been a long-standing part of the academic canon. My solution offers suggestions about how educators can take a stronger stance regarding intervening against rape culture on college campuses when college educators utilize the classroom as a space for social change and advocacy. If educators

¹ The two sides of this tension can best be understood by looking to the division that I offer in chapter one regarding the academy arguing the legitimacy of trigger warnings (i.e. Oberlin College, student and faculty reactions) and the public requesting that more be done to address assault on college campuses (i.e. Obama’s special task force and Hunting Ground).
are truly committed to responding to marginalization and trauma in society, then it seems useful to explore education as a tool for social change that rejects rape culture. Rape culture replicates itself through social normalization and critical communication pedagogy can be used to unteach the behaviors that underpin rape culture propagation.

bell hooks notes, “The classroom…remains a location of possibility… to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress.” This transformational view of educational practices converts the classroom from a place of “second assaults” into a space of liberation and social justice.

This chapter seeks to discuss the applied potential of trigger warnings while acknowledging how this adoption may impact theoretical considerations. I begin by suggesting that trigger warnings serve as a visible confirmation regarding the vitality of consent. Focusing on consent uncovers the need to address oppositional contradictions regarding how colleges respond to student mental health. Through exposing these oppositional contradictions, I argue my study utilizes rhetoric as a tool that can treat social ills, spotlighting an expansion of Burke’s work for this topic. Finally, I account for a possible unintended consequence facing those who participate in trauma studies.

6.2 Increasing Representation and Support of Consent

Toi Derricotte explains that the social terrain of rape culture is “an invisible map [that] has grown into the nerves and bones of the people, a reference not only to

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Specifically, one’s relationship to the other often is categorized by dominance and/or control. By continuously replicating this hierarchy of dominance and power some individuals are cast into the position of victim. For me, the first step to dismantling rape culture is reestablishing the vitality and necessity of honoring consent within our broader culture.

I see trigger warnings as a rhetorical intervention within traumatic material, as such trigger warnings value consent and acknowledge trauma. Rodrick P. Hart and Don M. Burkes explain, “the rhetorical approach, best promises to facilitate human understanding and to effect social cohesion.” Trigger warnings help individuals to no longer passively engage traumatic material, but instead suggest a communal dedication to alert individuals that may be marked by trauma that they have a choice regarding how they choose to process traumatic material. Understanding trigger warnings as a pedagogical tool symbolically requests that students consensually engage with classroom material and discussion. Additionally, CCP supports that pedological interventions, in this case trigger warnings, allow individuals to account for a restorative function within education. Trigger warnings offer a sense of choice and personal agency to students unable to work through representations of trauma. As rape culture provides trauma the ability to mark the body with self-resentment, survivors may resent a perceived inability to protect their bodies or may be hindered by the traumatic memory that resides in their bodies. In turn, trigger warnings intend to construct a community that understands how

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shame impacts the body by giving individuals the choice to talk about trauma or engage with traumatic discourse. The inclusion of trigger warnings challenges the institutional memory to recall and account for violence, whereas the opposition towards trigger warnings risks the erasure of the effects of assault in a community. As such, trigger warnings may increase the frequency individuals discuss trauma. This can be empowering as it allows for students to participate in a form of advocacy modeling that they can practice within the classroom in hopes that a similar stance can be applied outside of the classroom. Additionally, encouraging conversation regarding sexual assault aids in bystander intervention which may prevent acts of sexual assault before the trauma happens.\(^5\)

Charles Green, professor of English at Cornell University, warns that if, as academics and as a community, we continue to conflate the act of feeling uncomfortable with experienced trauma, we are missing the point of trigger warnings entirely.\(^6\) The use of trigger warnings as a tool both to preparing students for discomfort and provide a space to acknowledge sexual violence is very clear in my narratives within chapter five. If we expect individuals to honor the importance of consent, we must do the same as educators—there is no room for double standards when it comes to consent, as sexual double standards have always contributed to the prevalence of rape culture. Otherwise, there is a risk that instructors force material upon students. The previous chapter detailed


a version of Critical Communication Pedagogy that asks educators to reevaluate the relationship between themselves and students to understand that our classrooms can be co-constructed. If one refuses to utilize trigger warnings in conjunction with trauma-laden material, the educator is metaphorically embodying what Wayne Brockriede identified as a “rapist” stance regarding persuasion in his 1972 article, “Arguers as Lovers.”

Brockriede’s metaphor of “arguers as lovers” utilizes a (sexual) relationship between the rhetor and one’s audience to outline rhetorical ethics. This metaphoric framing asks critics to carefully examine the scope and positionality of the rhetor, their attitudes toward the other, and the consequences of the rhetorical situation. Much like Brockriede implores readers to grant him the “arguer” is an “inherent variable in understanding the outcomes of an argument,” I contend the educator becomes an inherent variable in classroom learning within the trigger warning debate—a role that bears the ethical responsibility to interrogate behavior. Like Brockriede’s arguer, instructors cannot ignore the influence that the audience should have within transactional communication.

The “rapist” stance is grounded in maintaining power and coercion by objectifying the audience through a lack of respecting elements of their humanity. In the trigger warning debate, ignoring the presence of trauma, or resorting to *ad hominem*

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7 Wayne Brockriede, "Arguers as Lovers," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* (1972): 1-11. The rapist is only concerned with oneself, a win at any cost that denies audience agency, often rhetorically resembling assault. A rhetor that refuses to use trigger warnings may purposefully be invoking the “rapist” stance assuming they know what is best for the audience. Another possible reason educators avoid trigger warnings may be tied to the rhetor not wanting to own the responsibility for triggering the audience. Thus, denying their role of responsibility in possible “second assaults”.

8 See Brockriede, “Arguers as Lovers,” page 1 for further reading on metaphoric framing.

9 See Brockriede, “Arguers as Lovers,” page 2-4.
attacks about a “coddled” generation destroying the integrity of the university, silences dissent to maintain control. The use of the “rapist” stance in persuasion mirrors the strategy of many trigger warning opponents who argue that an educator is not responsible for reducing the potential for student injury if they are unwittingly triggered. Instead, the “rapist” is only concerned with oneself. In the case of the academy one’s academic freedom, preserving self-autonomy, becomes more important than student autonomy. This monological focus on the educator as the only fully-human figure in the classroom means that this positionality often rhetorically resembles assault.

The “rapist” stance is intrinsically linked to power because the “rapist” protects their stance regardless of how this may impact the other’s subjectivity. An educator who refuses to use trigger warnings may purposefully, albeit unintentionally, be invoking the “rapist” stance assuming they know what is best for the student, as some educators suggest exposure to triggering material is the best treatment for healing from trauma.\(^\text{10}\) Forced engagement with traumatic material risks depersonalizing people who have experienced trauma and risks forcing them to relive their assault. As noted in chapter four, many of those that support trigger warning use do so because they have witnessed a “second assault” or experienced assault personally. I believe it is ethically irresponsible to risk a student potentially experiencing a “second assault.” for me, avoiding the reliving of the trauma is the primary motivator behind my support for trigger warnings.

Applying Brockriede’s metaphor in the trigger warning debate sheds light on the arguments of trigger warning proponents, and on the potential side effects regarding trauma-laden materials within the classroom. By paralleling persuasive pedagogical decisions with trigger warning pedagogical decisions my hope is this comparison may increase understanding of why individuals are fighting so vociferously for trigger warning inclusion. Utilizing the sexual metaphor to create a juxtaposition with actual sexual assault requires individuals to not only account for the physical violence of assault, but also to account for rhetorical violence. The “rapist” privileges their authority and position over their audience, ignoring ethics regarding both their captive audience and the importance of repositioning the classroom as a space of co-construction. Much like Barbara Biesecker requests that individuals re-imagine rhetorical situations as a transactional, constitutive process that influences both the speaker and the audience, I request the same in the context of the classroom.\textsuperscript{11} It has been my assertion throughout this study that providing captive audience members with trigger warnings prior to entering the classroom allows the educator to engage in an ethic of care, what Brockriede describes as the “lover” stance, which is the most ethical role for the rhetor or educator.\textsuperscript{12} Brockriede defines the “lover” stance as:

Lovers differ radically from rapists and seducers in their attitudes toward coarguers (sic). Whereas the rapist and seducer see a unilateral relationship toward the victim, the lover sees a bilateral relationship with a lover. Whereas the

\textsuperscript{11} Barbara Biesecker, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Difference," \textit{Philosophy and Rhetoric} 22, (1989): 110-130.

\textsuperscript{12} See Brockriede, “Arguers as Lovers” p. 5-7 discussing the role of the “lover.” The lover stance views the other as an equal and stresses power parity. Core values within the lover stance include: shared-decision-making and willingness to risk one’s individual values for the collective.
rapist and seducer look at the other person as an object or as a victim, the lover looks at the other person as a person.\textsuperscript{13}

The “lover” acknowledges that students help co-construct the classroom environment. This stance adheres to critical communication pedagogy by accounting for how individual identity is constituted in communication. While an instructor is still allowed to determine the classroom content, the student is given autonomy to choose whether it is in one’s best interest to engage with the material. The educational risk of the “lover” stance is that students may not attend or participate on days that the instructor is having class discussion rooted in trauma. Within the “lover” stance, each student is offered an invitation to engage with the material on their own terms. Accordingly, the “lover” stance helps fulfill the second commitment of CCP: educators understand power as fluid and complex. In this sense, trigger warnings serve as a tool to address power differentials within the classroom as well as account for possible unintended consequences inherent in navigating trauma.

The “lover” stance emphasizes an important factor to dismantling rape culture: community support. Advocating for the use and inclusion of trigger warnings within our pedagogy practices now not only provides a rhetorical signifier to account for rape culture, but also may serve as a stance of resistance and advocacy towards sexual assault prevention. Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren note that culture should anchor the practice of critical communication pedagogy as opposed to being an afterthought.\textsuperscript{14}

Regardless of how one positions oneself within the trigger warning debate, it is difficult

\textsuperscript{13} Brockriede, “Arguers as Lovers,” p. 5.
to ignore the propensity of sexual assault occurrences on campuses across the nation. Therefore, by acknowledging that rape culture is highly intertwined with college culture, trigger warnings serve as an advocacy of support to establish consent as a vital part of the educational experience—not just outside our classrooms, but inside as well.

Community support is particularly vital because it has been identified as one of the keys to social change and recovery for socially disciplined bodies. An educator’s use of trigger warnings as a tool might also perform a rhetorical exorcism that has the potential to negate the power of shame and silence, allowing individuals a path to attempt reclaiming their bodies from sexual trauma through providing agency in the classroom. Trigger warnings can be viewed as providing a balance between acknowledging one’s account of assault and alerting potential readers the choice of witnessing the account.

Trigger warnings also outline the parameters of safe space for individuals that have been

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16 Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands: la frontera. Vol. 3 (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 101. Anzaldúa extends the identity politics that are tied up in this discussion, “to achieve this type of freedom, one must move from convergent thinking, moving to a single goal, and move to divergent thinking, and working towards a whole perspective that includes rather than excludes”

17 Eli Clare, “Resisting Shame: Making Our Bodies Home,” Seattle Journal for Social Justice 8 (2010): 462. Clare argues, “Shame feeds upon isolation. If it were a toxic weed grown out of control, isolation would be its rain and fertilizer. In community at its best and most functional, we find reflections of ourselves.” This showcases how trauma can lead to individual isolation. Furthermore, this highlight why we need to address this issue culturally and individually.

18 Michael J. Hyde, The Life-Giving Gift of Acknowledgement (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 5. Hyde defines acknowledgement as, “a communicative and rhetorical behavior that grants attention to others and thereby makes room for them in our lives.” This action of acknowledgement helps transfer the issues of protection and healing from an individual act to a communal responsibility.
marked by assault. Uncovering the fact that trigger warnings encourage the
acknowledgement and support of consent reveals a potential area of concern for college
campuses regarding student well-being: the intersection of mental health care and
addressing sexual assault.

6.3 Oppositional Contradictions

Mental health was a common theme that emerged in the process of indexing
public discourse about trigger warnings for this study. Both proponents and opponents of
trigger warnings claimed to be concerned with students’ mental health. Individuals
supporting trigger warnings cited trigger warnings origins as a psychological practice
developed to prevent an individual with PTSD from experiencing flashbacks.
Alternatively, those opposed to trigger warnings cited psychological evidence suggesting
exposure as an effective treatment method for trauma. As was pointed out in chapter four,
while exposure is one possible mode of treatment for trauma recovery, exposure therapy
must be performed after substantial healing progress has been achieved by the patient and
under the supervision of trained psychological professionals. I contend that instance on
exposure therapy by educators is a contradictory stance that endangers student well-
being.

First, there is a clear contradiction within oppositional narratives regarding the
expertise of the educator. During indexing, I uncovered opponents saying the request of
trigger warning inclusion within the classroom is not feasible as one cannot expect
educators to have psychological training or expertise in how one should handle traumatic
situations. In this case, the claim is that the educator does not have the training required
to assert expertise about the treatment of trauma or trauma prevention. Yet, at the same
time, they contend that they know how to help the students: “No, really, I have enough
expertise to know that by exposing a student with PTSD to trauma, I am actually
encouraging the student to heal. I am acting in the student’s best interest.”\textsuperscript{19} It is vital to
request that the opposition and the academy address this contradiction as one should not
be able to say, “I don’t have any training, but I can heal you.” It also is important to draw
attention to how this message has dangerous implications for rape culture as the stance
that exposure is the best medicine seems very close to rapists adamantly claiming the
victim “wanted it.” While this addresses a contradiction on the micro-level, there is a
larger concern on the macro-level when addressing student well-being.

During my research for chapter five, I realized there is a peripheral danger that I
had not addressed at the intersection of sexual assault awareness and mental health care.
The university is failing to meet student’s needs in two major ways: it is not effectively
stopping rape culture and is not providing adequate services for healthcare needs.
Essentially, I viewed Obama’s task force as a moment where colleges could unite to do
better in reporting and preventing sexual assault on campus. Lisa Wade, professor of
sociology at Occidental College, believes that the university is still suffering from a
sexual assault epidemic. Wade warns, “Until [universities] change their minds about the
role sex plays on campus, sexual misconduct will continue.”\textsuperscript{20} Based on the most recent
survey conducted, 11.2\% of all students experience rape or sexual assault through

\textsuperscript{19} This serves as hypothetical statements that I have constructed as a composite character. I have heard this
reasoning parroted back to me during discussions about implementing trigger warnings.

\textsuperscript{20} Lisa Wade, “Rape on Campus: Athletes, Statistics and the Sexual Assault Crisis,” \textit{Salon}, March 12, 2017,
sexual-assault-crisis_partner/.
physical force, violence, or incapacitation (among all graduate and undergraduate students) while 35% of all students have been victim to a sexual assault attempt. These numbers are staggering if one considers how these statistics serve as demographics for classrooms across the academy. While doing nothing and assuming service statements already cover PTSD is one option, as discussed in chapter five, there is little efficacy behind this stance when one considers how colleges are also failing to meet mental health needs of students. Students attending Northwestern University often wait three weeks to get a counseling appointment while students at the University of Washington in Seattle face delays that are “so routine, the wait time is posted online; it’s consistently hovered between two and three weeks in recent months”. In 2016, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health found a troubling concern: over the past decade, “not only did the rise in demand for counseling services [among students] outpace that of enrollment growth, it outpaced it by five times as much.” Based on the lack of a clear tactical response to either crisis, educators must act with an increased concern regarding student well-being and safety. While trigger warnings will not completely solve either issue, trigger warnings do have the potential to serve as a significant intervention by reducing the probability of classroom re-traumatization. Again, trigger warnings can serve as a first response that signifies that the academy recognizes the correlation between assault and

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PTSD, in so much that the academy wants to take a corrective stance to address the issue. The potentiality to treat and attend to a student’s well-being also relies on rhetoric as a medicinal tool. To further explore rhetorical treatments for trauma, I now turn to how this study may influence further conversations and integrations of Kenneth Burke.

6.4 Expanding Burkean Conversations and Contributions

This study developed out of a Burkean foundation, as the method of indexing unveiled interesting findings regarding ideology, power, and knowledge. However, this framework also revealed two areas that warrant further consideration as these areas were not part of my initial scope but became apparent after I zoomed out my focus. As noted in the previously, indexing as method may reveal blind spots or shortcomings within a researcher’s initial framing of an issue. Indexing within this study not only revealed the need to include critical communication pedagogy, but also revealed groupings that were not directly focused on within the initial analysis such as “protecting student well-being.” For example, while student well-being may be loosely tied to ideology, power, and/or knowledge, each of these categories fail to capture the richness represented within the texts regarding student well-being.

This finding becomes important regarding the understanding of indexing. As stated in chapter three, Burke did not explicitly define indexing as a methodology; therefore, restorative projects have tried to piece together a better conceptualization of indexing. What this study adds to the conversation is that indexing as method can reveal terministic screens within the project. Index groupings may suggest the need for future studies within the researcher’s initial findings. This pivot allows suggestions for future
studies to be justified through tracked data as opposed to taking a predictive stance of what may be out there. The predictive stance that is most often used to project future research is rooted in a possibility of discovery, whereas indexing is rooted in confirmed discovery that needs to be interpreted by the researcher. Following a researcher’s initial focus, they can look back to the indexing and ask: What did indexing reveal that I did not initially account for? When asking myself this question, I realized that student well-being was being used as a protective value by both sides of the debate.

Another insight can be garnered when considering Burke’s discussion of rhetoric and literature as treatments for social ills. In Counter-Statement, Burke describes the many functions of symbol use. As critics, we should pay special attention to two of these functions: a) symbols can help point us to accept a situation we would otherwise avoid, and b) symbols can prompt the reader to uncover patterns of experience that have been “submerged,” or deflected by one’s environmental condition. These two functions acknowledge that naming has the power to surface experience from the oppressed/repressed mind and call it into being. Because naming has the power to bring the experience to life and possibly cause flashbacks in the audience, we need to understand how trauma narratives are best handled. Burke suggests that language can function as medicine for social problems. It is my argument that the current use of trigger warnings serves as homeopathic treatment for processing trauma narratives. When

26 Burke, Counter-Statement, 155
individuals read or hear a trigger warning, theoretically there are two choices: quit reading/listening to avoid exposure or choose to be exposed. By continuing exposure to the triggering rhetoric, the individual has the potential to increase immunity/tolerance. Burke acknowledges that such exposure would accept the emotional risk in being triggered by a situation as a means of addressing or confronting trauma. This slight pivot within perspective may also help increase common ground and understanding between the two sides. However, if trigger warnings are to maintain their curative potential, it becomes necessary to protect and preserve the violence inherent within the term trigger warnings.

6.5 Accounting for the Researcher’s Body within Trauma Research

There are risks associated with coming out as a sexual assault survivor. The declaration marks the body as collateral damage of masculine social disciplining and rape culture. The fear of being rejected or minimalized by disclosing sexual assault may influence the role silence and invisibility play within our culture, particularly for sexual assault survivors. The silence surrounding sexual assault is often viewed only through statistics rooted in reporting to authorities; however, silence also functions on a personal level regarding how survivors share their personal narrative. Courtney E. Ahrens found that negative reactions to a survivor’s disclosure may lead to a silencing effect, wherein the survivor questions whether future disclosures will be beneficial, and alternatively,

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may refuse to tell anyone else about the incident. Because of this, I would be remiss if I did not establish the difficulty I faced while working on this topic for my dissertation regarding the concern of side bias and self-care.

When I embarked on this study (and throughout the defense of my prospectus), my advisor and committee voiced concern that I demonstrated a clear side bias when discussing the trigger warning debate. Despite multiple revisions and additional research, I acknowledge I still demonstrate some bias in how I construct the narratives of those who oppose trigger warnings. Researchers engaging trajectories of scholarship on traumatic material and personal experience should consider adopting moments of transparency within their research to account for the how they discuss the trauma. Lester C. Olson notes that rhetoric(s) of trauma tend to display similar characteristics; specifically, “advocates call for vigilance in coping with the hatred of oppressive adversaries…[and] advocates typically depict …an agonistic struggle between good and evil.” Essentially, a researcher writing about a trauma they have personally experienced is more likely to take up a polarizing stance, one that perceptually appears biased and belligerent. While I have continuously worked to reduce the polarization between the two camps in the trigger warning debate by analyzing the shared ideograph of <protection>, I still demonstrate characteristics of rhetoric(s) of trauma active within my positionality. For example, this resulted in me adopting standards of ethics to justify the use of trigger warnings – a move that caused my research to take a moral positioning (Olson’s “good


and evil”) as opposed to pure reporting. To account for this bias, my decision to develop chapter five as a handbook for incorporating trigger warnings into pedagogy is directly tied to my use of advocacy as a means of coping with my own sexual trauma. Noting that my framing is produced from a position of trauma further highlighted the need to establish a plan of self-care regarding engaging “mesearch” within the project.

As a researcher, it is important to establish lines of self-care when writing on topics of trauma. What I learned during this process is that researchers may need to establish self-care strategies when engaging with “mesearch.” In 2014, Vinh Nguyen, a doctoral candidate in English and cultural studies at McMaster University, Ontario, defined “mesearch” as the “intimate and inextricable connections between [the researcher’s] life experiences…and [the researcher’s] academic research.” As such, the investigator needs to be prepared for how the personal becomes represented and/or negotiated within the research text. For me, there were times that I had to step away from this study because I did not have the affective level of my own trauma contained. As I prepared for each step of defending this project, I often had to turn to mental health support. A constant concern while working through this project is rooted in feeling like a survivor feels, that my account within this study is not enough or accurate enough to believe. I turned to a weekly therapist after Donald Trump became President, because to me, it signified that our country used ballots to support a perpetrator of sexual assault. I understood his election to be a cultural testimony regarding our denial of rape culture. I also did not know what validity my project had in this context, a question that I am still struggling with. However, regardless of the presidential administration there remains an enduring need to examine both rape culture and sexual assault if one hopes to reduce this

societal aliment of sexual violence. Internal struggles like this made it necessary to establish and continue modes of self-care. There are important works that are birthed out of “mesearch,” but every researcher needs to have the ability to separate oneself from the work and allow the research to be evaluated on its own merit. This observation is key to maintaining research practices that benefit both the researcher and the project.

6.6 (Im)possible Future Articulations

At its core, this project affirms the importance and vitality of consent, and I welcome future research that continues this work. As a scholar, I know that I come to this conversation as a part of the minority. This means that my research and experience can be discounted, disregarded, or used to bolster positions that I do not support. Just as opponents of trigger warnings worried about trigger hysteria, I am concerned that my study could be for purposes other than valuing and honoring consent. To be clear, this project is rooted in acknowledging the experience of marginalized individuals on college campuses. I would welcome extensions acknowledging the experience of those marginalized by racism, sexism, and/or homophobia. Specifically, with how content notes may best off set some level of marginalization. However, this project is not intended to support hate speech or to be twisted to benefit the privileged. Any cooptation that ignores the importance of consent and/or re-entrenches rape culture is precisely what I am trying to resist.

It is important to note that the scope of this project was limited to the fervor of public argument in the trigger warning debate from January 2014 to May 2015. Since then, a number of discussions have developed concerning the role of education, academic
freedom, and competing visions of protection on college campuses. While I am not able to address these ongoing conversations within this project, my research suggests that there is a need to re-evaluate polarizing practices within the academy. We do not grow from this conversation if we fail to listen to those with competing perspectives. Future scholarship may productively focus on building a response to seemingly polarized academic disputes.

It is clear that there were some missed opportunities when the trigger warning debate was sensationalized into caricatures instead of working to find a middle ground. As scholars continue to work in this area, it would be useful to continue to explore issues of definition, including who and what warrants a trigger warning, because much of the disagreement is rooted in unclear guidelines for trigger warning inclusion. A larger conversation could examine how student consent is structured and accounted for within educational practices and pedagogy. Personally, I am interested in utilizing indexing to discover how polarizing terms like “fragility” play out in public arguments about higher education. I also believe future research could build on the various ideographs embedded within the debate.

My goal in this final chapter was to take up the pieces of this project that still needed to be unpacked and examined. It is my hope that future iterations of this project will include translating the guide outlined in chapter five into a more accessible handbook that I can share with student governments and faculty senates that are discussing the future of trigger warnings on campus. I plan on placing the handbook and study on open source platforms to increase accessibility. Additionally, I continue to volunteer for talks across campus regarding sexual assault prevention and response.
Within these discussions, I always offer a trigger warning and then a five-minute break before beginning so that the audience is not blindsided by trauma or forced to out themselves within the situation. My hope is that this project increases our awareness and care for the potential of “second-assaults” within course material. At the end of the day, the goal of this study and my advocacy is to continually try and dismantle rape culture one conversation at a time.
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